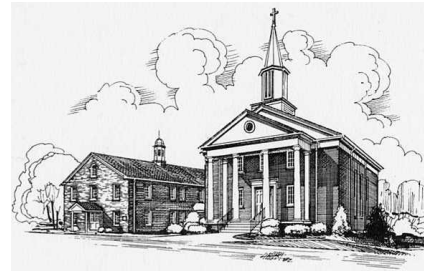


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Second Sunday after Christmas

All Years



Jeremiah 31:7-14
Matthew 2:13-23
Psalm 84 or 84:1-8

The Collect

O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Thus says the LORD:

Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,
and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;
proclaim, give praise, and say,
“Save, O LORD, your people,
the remnant of Israel.”

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,

and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
among them the blind and the lame, those with child
and

those in labor, together;
a great company, they shall return here.

With weeping they shall come,
and with consolations I will lead them back,

I will let them walk by brooks of water,
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble;
for I have become a father to Israel,
and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Hear the word of the LORD, O nations,
and declare it in the coastlands far away;

say, “He who scattered Israel will gather him,
and will keep him as a shepherd a flock.”

For the LORD has ransomed Jacob,
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for
him.

They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the
LORD,

over the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and over the young of the flock and the herd;
their life shall become like a watered garden,
and they shall never languish again.

Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,
and the young men and the old shall be merry.

I will turn their mourning into joy,
I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sor-
row.

I will give the priests their fill of fatness,
and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty,

says the LORD.

Psalm 84 or 84:1-8 Page 707, BCP

Quam dilecta!

- 1 How dear to me is your dwelling, O LORD of hosts!
My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.
- 2 The sparrow has found her a house
and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young;
by the side of your altars, O LORD of hosts,
my King and my God.
- 3 Happy are they who dwell in your house!
they will always be praising you.
- 4 Happy are the people whose strength is in you!
whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way.
- 5 Those who go through the desolate valley will find it a place of springs,
for the early rains have covered it with pools of water.
- 6 They will climb from height to height,
and the God of gods will reveal himself in Zion.
- 7 LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer;
hearken, O God of Jacob.
- 8 Behold our defender, O God;
and look upon the face of your Anointed.
- 9 For one day in your courts is better than a thousand in my own room,
and to stand at the threshold of the house of my God
than to dwell in the tents of the wicked.
- 10 For the LORD God is both sun and shield;
he will give grace and glory;
- 11 No good thing will the LORD withhold
from those who walk with integrity.
- 12 O LORD of hosts,
happy are they who put their trust in you!

Matthew 2:13-23

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.’

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been

spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

‘A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no
more.’

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the

prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He will be called a Nazorean.’

SERMON

I confess that I'm daft for black Gospel music. Once, I even tried to learn to sing it, under the tutelage of no less than Ethel Caffie-Austin, the first lady of West Virginia Gospel. If she couldn't teach me, I reasoned, I can't be taught. She couldn't. I can't. But even if I don't sing it, I enjoy listening to it. One of my favorites is “He's Got the Whole World in His Hands”. There is a lot of very serious theology about God's sovereignty and grace that gets summed up in a single verse, “He's got the whole world in his hands.”

I'll show you what I mean. In our Old Testament passage, Isaiah is celebrating God's salvation of Israel. They had been exiled to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. Now, nearly 60 years later, they are being allowed by Cyrus of Persia, who had conquered Babylon, to return

and rebuild the Temple. Behind it all, Isaiah saw God's hand. In his view, the salvation of Israel wasn't the result of political expediency, or even the result of Cyrus having a real good day, but rather he saw God holding the whole world in his hands and directing the events. Israel had sinned by turning to other gods, and by not cleaving to God, and God sent them into exile to correct them, but it wasn't forever. Like any good parent, God let them out of “time out” when the lesson was learned, asking himself,

Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely.

Now, if you can't identify with that, you've never had kids. And if you have had kids, you know what's coming. They're going to dip the cat's tail in the finger paint again, sure as you're born. And they'll do it all over

again, back in time out, back to correcting behavior.

The one thing you won't do, though, is to stop loving them. You're not going to throw your hands up and stop feeding them, or lock them in the basement.

God's relationship to His people never runs smoothly, just as our relationships with our kids never run smoothly, and if you think about it, there's no reason to suppose that it should. If kids were born knowing everything that they'd need for happy, fulfilled lives, with all the emotional resources for dealing with the disappointments and mis-steps that life deals up, they'd have no need for parents. If we were born knowing how to relate to God, how to commune with the Holy Spirit, how to hear the voice of God and obey it, we'd have no need of a savior. Kids aren't, and neither are we. It takes a long time to understand, really understand, what “He's

got the whole world in his hands” means.

Take the birth of our Lord, for example. Our passage for today comes just after the Magi have left, leaving their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. My mentor and teacher, Brother Kit Hathorn of Minden Louisiana, says of the gifts the Magi brought that God was seeing to it that the child support was paid – that the family would have the resources needed for the long trip to come. Without the gifts of the Magi, it's hard to understand how Mary and Joseph and the two-year old Jesus could have picked up sticks, gone to Egypt and supported themselves until Herod died. It's not like Joseph could have signed up with the Carpenter's and Millwrights Union in Egypt. Egypt was a foreign country.

While they were gone, Matthew tells us, Herod vent-

ed his spleen in a story that we hardly ever study -- the slaughter of the innocents. When Herod discovers that he's been fooled by the Magi, who went home another way on the advice of an angel, he sends soldiers to kill every male child in Bethlehem two years of age or under. It's horrible. It's nothing to put with the manger set on top of the TV. It's not a part of the Christmas story that we want to tell our kids. But it is a part of the Christmas story. Jesus the toddler isn't a magical figure who could zap the soldiers. He is a baby, as human and fragile as any two year old. The angel clearly tells Joseph,

“Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”

In other words, Jesus could have been killed by the

soldiers.

Sometimes, I think, we see Jesus as some sort of super-hero, with a big blue “J” on his chest and maybe a cape. When we do that, when we insist on Jesus' divinity over his humanity, we tread on a heresy called docetism, the belief that Jesus only appeared to have a physical body, but was really a divine spirit. This story from Matthew shows us, without question, that Jesus was fully human. He could have been struck down by a soldier if the angel hadn't warned Joseph or if Joseph hadn't instantly obeyed.

The clouds of authority, in the form of Herod the Horrible, were, even in his infancy, gathering around Jesus, those clouds which would dog him throughout his ministry, and finally kill him. Yes, the forces that opposed Jesus would, seemingly, win and bring about his death,

but when? When it was the right time. Until then, God saw to it that Jesus and his family were safely hidden away in a foreign land, beyond the reach of Herod.

And who would determine when the right time was? God would make that determination, for he holds the whole world in his hands. And until that time, all needs will be met to see to it that the young Jesus grows into the adult that the world awaits.

Sometimes, when I offer the example of Jesus to people who are struggling with issues of hate and hurt and refusal to forgive I'm told "That's Jesus. I'm not that good." What they are telling me is that they believe that God's power is limited by their virtue. God can only help the already righteous, and if He runs into Just Joe, he's stopped cold. What nonsense! We believe that God could speak a word and bring the whole universe into

existence, but that somehow He is unable to take you or you or you and work change in your hearts? Phooey!

What they're really telling me is that they don't want to stop hurting or hating or refusing to forgive, and have found this last refuge in which to hide from God.

God has the power, the authority to see to it that all needs are met to bring His story to conclusion. When we celebrate the birth of Jesus in a stable we must also acknowledge that He was born for the cross. That is his story, because without the cross, there can be no resurrection. God has the power to see to it that this story comes to the conclusion that it must.

In some of today's churches, God's power to meet all needs is being roughly abused. In those ministries which teach “prosperity gospel”, God's sovereignty is being characterized as a sort of cosmic slot machine.

Rather than God having the whole world in his hands, the believers think they have God in their hands, to do their bidding. That's not the message of Matthew here.

God communicated with Joseph in a dream, and Joseph obeyed. Joseph responded to the quiet voice of God in a dream and moved his family to Egypt. Notice that the angel in the dream tells Joseph to “get up” and take the family. Not “as soon as you can”. Not “no later than next week”. Get up, now! and take the family to Egypt. And Joseph did. Don't you wish you could have heard that discussion with Mary at 2:00 am? In Matthew's telling, Joseph and Mary lived in Bethlehem, not Nazareth. They had a home and perhaps animals. Joseph is telling Mary to get up in the middle of the night and go, leaving behind everything but the gold, frankincense, and myrrh, I'm guessing. That's the kind

of obedience we need to live in the light of God. When God speaks, we are to respond, and when we respond, even though we leave behind EVERYTHING we have had before, our entire lives, God will meet every need to bring about the conclusion that He intends. It is, as you can imagine, something close to Kathy's and my experience. I think Kathy can identify with what Mary felt better than anyone. “You told the judge what? You did what?”

Notice that I said that God will meet every need to bring about the conclusion that He intends, not that God will meet every need we have. Jesus was born to be crucified. That is part of the conclusion God intended, and it is vital for us to remember that we live in a world that God holds in his hands. We are not forming a new creation of our own design.

We aren't told how long the Holy Family remained in Egypt but when Herod died in 4 b.c.e. Joseph was again commanded in a dream.

Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.

Again, Joseph responded immediately.

Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

Another of those middle-of-the-night moves. What in the world must Mary be thinking of her husband?

The account in Matthew of the flight to Egypt and the slaughter of the innocents offers us a lot of different lessons. One is that evil, real evil, exists in the world. That Herod was wicked is beyond dispute. Herod was worse than the worst you have ever encountered. We sometimes see the world we live in as a battle between

good and evil, as if the outcome wasn't already settled. We fear that evil will win unless good is a little evil itself. Unless the good people are willing to waterboard the bad people a little, to execute the bad guys a little, good has no chance. In other words, we act as if we think that God and the devil are somehow evenly matched, and that the battle could go either way unless we intervene on terms set by us.

But the baby Jesus was up against the worst you can imagine and prevailed. He prevailed because it isn't an even match. God has the whole world in his hands, from the little bitty babies to all of us. We compromise our commitment to the teachings of Jesus Christ and act out of fear when we forget that God's sovereignty extends to each of us. When we do that, we are not being good Christians. We're instead contributing to the

charges of hypocrisy that have been leveled against us since the beginning. “They claim to love everybody, but they....” You fill in the blanks with whatever hypocritical actions we have taken in the past in the name of God.

Those of us who call ourselves Christian are the ambassadors of Christ in the world. Our every action, our every word, every position we take must, must, reflect and illustrate our belief that God has the whole world in his hands, that God is sovereign and that Jesus Christ is Lord.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

The Bible texts of the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel lessons are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Church of Christ in the USA, and used by permission.

The Collects, Psalms and Canticles are from the Book of Common Prayer, 1979.

Sermon Copyright © 2014 J. Stewart Schneider
