

In the Shadow of the Sphinx

Matthew 2: 13-21

First Presbyterian Church
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This morning we have before us Luc Olivier Merson's painting, "Rest on the Flight to Egypt." I stumbled across this painting in a catalogue some years ago and was captivated by it. I have a print of it in my office. There's a depth to Merson's image that continually takes us inside the Scripture text that is before us this morning.



Let's take a moment to look at this painting. Far to the right, there in the desert sand is Joseph. He is asleep, crashed next to the donkey and a small cooking fire. The holy family is simply exhausted, defenseless under the night in their desperate need for sleep. You can see that the sky is the deep dark of night in a place far away from any village lights. Now let's look at the left side:



Sand has blown around the base of the sphinx. The stone creature sits in enigmatic repose as it has done for two thousand years. Silver moonlight shines on its face and casts black shadows around it. The night is still. The sphinx is an unmoving sentinel in the desert, a silent testimony to an empire and a god whose time has come and gone.

Mary lies next to one of the great lion paws, leaning against the arm and chest of the creature. Her body is limp, draped across the statue. One arm, however, is tightly around the child in her lap. Any mother of an infant knows the mysterious ability to sleep from exhaustion while still keeping a firm grip on her baby. Even asleep, a part of the mother is aware of her child.

The baby also is sleeping, his face turned away from his mother. The radiance of the Christ child shines from his face to illumine with yellow light his mother and the chest of the creature. The interior, spiritual light of the Son of God is manifest in the quiet of the night. Sheltering in the arms of an ancient enemy, the fragile child shines forth the world's best hope.

What has brought them here? Yet another dream in this miraculous story has moved events along. Joseph, dear Joseph who walked past shame to take the pregnant Mary as his wife, knew there was no turning back from the voice of God now. He had already seen too much. The mysterious visitors from the East with their lavish gifts had bowed before the child. The star had shone above the house. And now an angel had come to him again in the night with a warning, "Get up, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

This story interrupts the peaceful, sweet scenes of Christmas that we love. It does not fit well with a Live Nativity. It is not what we have come to see. For the Flight to Egypt brings Christmas smack into the real world. It tells us that the stakes were high, eternally high. Jesus did not live in a holy bubble. The violence of the world threatened him from the beginning.

Let's consider this more closely. The ruler of the land did not want any competition. The presence of the incarnate God in the world was a magnet for the powers of darkness. They wanted to put out his light. Those who benefit

from the way things have always been do not like signs of new life. The king could not stand a contender to his throne, not even a child.

This leads to a first observation: God come to us in the flesh is a direct challenge to human autonomy. God in skin, even as a helpless infant, is provocative. If Jesus were just a principle, a form of spirituality, he would not be offensive at all. That's why you can talk about spirituality, or faith, at a dinner party all night long and not offend anyone. You might bore them to death, but you wouldn't offend them. But start talking about God come in skin, and people get very nervous. A God in skin, the eternal God come among us as one of us, is a direct challenge to the world and its rulers, religions, and pursuits.

At first, this might strike us as odd. For the message of Christmas is so positive. "Your King has arrived." This is the most wonderful news of all. God has not left us alone. He has come to us. In the midst of our darkness, he has shined his light. Along the sharp, broken streets where we live, a healer has come. To the ache of our lonely hearts, the lover of our souls has come to fill us up with the warmth of his presence. In the great chaos and disintegration of the mess we have made, the Creator has come to rule over us with his peace and set things right. This indeed is glad tidings of great joy which shall be unto all people.

We need the Lord Jesus to reign over us. We need him personally. And this tired, sad world needs him. But there is a problem. When Jesus reigns, it means that the other kings are deposed. Other kings don't like to be displaced; they want to rule. At the most personal level, I simply don't want to surrender the throne of my life to anyone. I want to rule. I want to be king. I want God to serve me in the way that I see fit. At the macro level, humanity as a whole resists the reign of God. We do this in many forms, whether it's totalitarian rule of dictatorships or the rule of market forces being allowed to run over morality. It could be the tight control of cultural norms that keep us from loving the least and the lost. It could be the blatant self-assertion of aggressive atheists. It could be the lukewarm faith of Christians who only half-heartedly acknowledge their Lord. The powers that be, inside us or in the culture, do not welcome our king like we might expect.

So just like Herod, we still try to get rid of baby God. One way to do this these days is to spiritualize Jesus. Make him a way of love, a feeling of faith, merely a good example and we can get him safely off to heaven. We can place him neatly in the spiritual realm and leave him out of the realm of business, or personal autonomy, or my private choices about behavior. But if baby Jesus means God has come here, to earth, as a person, then God has suddenly gotten

involved in every aspect of humanity. He walks among the tables where the business men do their trade, and he has something to say about their ethics—and this man is God talking. He walks among our relationships and he doesn't loosen the standards of love and fidelity. He tightens them, and this man is God talking. He walks among our need for revenge and grudges and demands the turning of the cheek—and this man is God talking. His sovereignty makes claims over every area of life. Nothing and no one is safe from this intruding God.

So Herod was willing to commit rampant infanticide to ferret out and destroy this child. You, too, may have experienced the rage of Herod when God claimed you in worship, or prayer, or Bible study. He asked for hidden areas of your life and you may not have wanted to give them over. We may well want to snuff out the light of this Christ. Or perhaps you had an experience of giving your life to him in a new way. When you first came home with new life inside you, wanting to live a new way, expressing fresh faith in the incarnate Christ child, people didn't like it. They said you'd changed, you'd gotten weird on them. The powers continue in many ways to try to snuff out Christ who has come to us.

The story of the Flight to Egypt tells us that we still have to guard the Lord Jesus who has come to live within us. We will have to nurture the part of us that yearns to connect to God. And we will have to keep Christ safe from the other part of us that wants to stay on the throne, be autonomous, and even kill the life of God in us. We will have to realize that life is a struggle. The spiritual life of staying connected to God is a struggle. Belonging to Christ Jesus means keeping the fire burning and not letting it get snuffed out by distractions, by indifference, by self-centeredness, by despair, or by doubt. Herod is always out there and we must be vigilant.

Returning to the story, isn't it curious that God directed Mary and Joseph to find shelter in the land of Israel's former oppression? Nearly two thousand years earlier, Egypt had been at the height of its power. The pharaoh had enslaved the Hebrews who settled there during a famine. For four hundred years God's people lived and died short lives in the hot sun, making bricks from straw to the crack of the whip. All that time the sphinx sat silent in the sand, a testimony to the power of the pharaoh, and the god of the Egyptians. Who could ever have envisioned a day when pharaoh would not reign? Who could hope to escape the makers of the ever vigilant sphinx?

By the time Jesus was born, the empire which had seemed eternal was overrun three times. Each new conqueror crushed Egypt's people and pillaged its culture more than the last. By this time all that was left were the great

pyramids and the sphinx, monuments of what once seemed eternal, but now appeared as transitory as the seasons.

So here is a second observation: What seems eternal and invincible in this world is as evanescent as a dream before the sovereign God who dressed in a suit of baby skin and came among us. Pharaoh left us a pyramid but his power is gone. The eternal God of Israel lives on. In Rome you can still see the Coliseum, or walk in the ruins of the Forum, but Caesar is only dust in the ground. The eternal God and his church live on. One day, when we run out of fossil fuel, mighty Exxon will be no more. One day, much sooner than we expect, the memory of national championship games will fade into black. One day, the record of my sermons will be dust and all my best writing long forgotten. One day, even our fair America may be changed beyond recognition. But the eternal God and his Christ live on. And God is working his purposes out. Only what partakes of the one Triune God and his will for us will last. All else is bound for the fire to be burned up as dross. God looks upon the power of the world in all its pomp and simply declares, “One day I will rest as a helpless babe in the arms of the mightiest symbol of your strength—and I will be perfectly safe.”

The poet William Everson wrote about the baby Jesus and the Flight to Egypt:

This was the first of his goings forth into the wilderness of the world.
There was much to follow: much of portent, much of dread.
But what was so meek then and so mere, so slight and strengthless,
(Too tender, almost, to be touched)—what they nervously guarded,
Guarded them.ⁱ

What they nervously guarded, guarded them. God was in the world in helpless form, needing the shelter of two insignificant people to survive Herod’s mad assault. Yet that dependent child was the life of the world which sought to kill him. God was in the world by contraries, slipping in under cover of night, making his plans and weaving his will while Herod’s soldiers turned the town upside down looking for him.

Here, then is the final observation: Jesus is the weakness of humanity and the strength of God in one. He is fully who we are while never ceasing to be all that he is as the eternal Son. Son of Man and Son of God. This is the key to a successful, growthful life in Christ. If we come to him out of our strength, we come competing with God for the control of the throne. Our self-sufficiency clashes with his rule, and we are doomed to fail. But when we come with our weaknesses, we find communion with the one who has come to take up what we

are. When we come with our need for a savior, we find him who is joined to us in true humanity. And he pours all the life and power of God into us. What Mary and Joseph nervously guarded, guarded them.

So, too, you and I may be trying to guard this tiny flame of faith that is in us. Herod wants to chase us and hunt us down. We are on the run, searching for home. Our faith is so weak. It is so easily distracted. It is so vulnerable. We despair of guarding what is entrusted to us.

But do not despair! Look to Jesus. He is guarding us. My faith is pitiful, weak, full of doubts and self-absorption. I could never have gotten Jesus as far as Egypt, even to as precarious a shelter as the arms of a sphinx. No, I would have failed much sooner. But the Child is mighty! The helpless babe is the Lord of the universe. The one I struggle so hard to keep close, keeps me.

Look to him. Keep your eyes fixed not on some nebulous spirituality, but on the God in skin, the man Jesus who is the Lord. Keep your eyes and heart filled, not with confidence in this world, in its powers and pretensions to permanence. Remember the sphinx, remember Rome. Rather, let us keep our hearts filled with the one who alone is eternal, in whom is all our life. For he still delights to choose what is weak, and display his strength through us. He still picks up what is discarded and makes it a jewel in his crown. He still bypasses proud kings and blesses babies in the arms of tired, poor peasant girls. Look not to your strength then, but to your need for him. Offer him that and see that this tiny babe guards you. He guards your heart with forgiveness, your life with his eternal love, your steps with his peace.

ⁱ William Everson,, “The Flight in the Desert,” anthologized in *Chapters Into Verse*, vol. 2, ed. Robert Atwan and Laurance Wieder, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, p 44.