

Church of the Servant

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Scripture: Matthew 2:13ff

2010 was a helluva year. For members of this church is brought financial difficulties, jobs lost, and lots of worries. And it brought sadnesses and loss as well. And it's easy to remember the images of the broader world—maybe we see these images every year—but think of poor Haiti, dealing now with cholera, and of the refugees in Pakistan, and the terrible flooding. It was not an easy year.

And difficulties and pain seem worse around Christmastime, when all should be merry and bright. Even if we can get beyond Christmas's consumeristic themes—when we think gifts will solve all our problems and finally make us truly happy—we then come face to face with the peaceful mother and baby idea, the idea that somehow we will find contentment and serenity in the graceful nativity scene.

But we don't find true happiness or serenity. We just have our same old lives, which include plenty of suffering and difficulty. And, actually, that's what the nativity stories tell us to expect.

We can start with Luke's stories which include a displaced couple, the woman of whom has nowhere to give birth. And we remember that it was not the rich or secure who received the message of the holy birth, but shepherds—shepherds from the bottom of the economic ladder. I once heard someone in a sermon compare those shepherds to today's valet parking attendants—who keep watch over our cars by night.

But it's when we move into Matthew's stories that things really get rough.

We have already heard of Joseph's struggle to accept and marry Mary—a young woman who has broken social norms and puts not only herself but also him in danger of ostracism. But then comes the story of the Wise Men who unwittingly stir up trouble in Jeerusalem by asking where to find a new baby king. King Herod is disturbed that anyone might challenge his reign. As the wise men are leaving their royal gifts with the young child, Herod is sending soldiers to slaughter all young boys in the area. The children who die remind us of all the pointless suffering of children and other innocent victims, and how their suffering often buys protection for others, or returns unbalanced situations to the status quo.

And Matthew's story continues with today's gospel, in which Joseph is warned that Herod and his henchmen are trying to murder the child. Joseph—already challenged—now has to flee his home in order to protect this special child.

If any of us thought that having God in the world with us would make things easy, these stories should open our eyes. Joseph and Mary must have been confused and terrified; they must have wondered what God was doing. And the political worlds of Jerusalem and Bethlehem were turned upside down.

At first this all seems ironic. The Christmas story is about God's love come to earth—shouldn't that protect us? Shouldn't God deliver us from dangers like these? We do feel confused and let down when hit with fear or grief. Yet God sent Jesus not to take away our difficulties or to sanitize human existence, but to share them, to be our companion. And these stories make us clear that from his very birth, Jesus does enter fully into the suffering of human existence.

At first this may not seem like Good News. But in a way it is. Each of us can realize that our life is not the unhappy exception, that our pain is not unusual or somehow more deserved. No, we're all in this together. We all experience suffering and challenge—and that "all" includes our God. God is hip deep in the same mess we're in! God is with us.

Joseph gives us an example of how to respond. He's an unsung hero who doesn't get much time in the spotlight. But he gets up and does what needs to be done. He must have been afraid to fall asleep for fear of what order an angel would give him this time! But the scripture says it over and over: He got up and went. Joseph held onto faith, to hope, and to his own integrity and just kept doing what had to be done. Like Jesus whom he would raise, he followed the path before him and found that through faithfulness and through suffering, came deliverance.

May we too gather ourselves together to do God's will even in the midst of this rough and tumble world, and may we find the grace to stand as companions—representing our God—to others who strive and suffer. In this striving and in this companionship, God is with us.