



Second Sunday after Christmas

January 3, 2009

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I love seeing Christmas spirit moving among people. I mean the spirit of love, care and warmth found in these twelve, amazing days when we celebrate the birth of our Lord. I find Christmas spirit in the laughter of family gatherings and in hugs between children and great-grandparents. I see it in neighbors reaching out to one another, neighbors close by and neighbors across the community. When my wife, Pam, and I go shopping, I love finding that spirit alive and well among those who work in busy retail businesses. I enjoy seeing if I can make them laugh or smile. This year it wasn't hard.

You see I was encouraged from an early age in my life to look for the good in people. Introduce me to someone you think is a curmudgeon, and I am going to wait patiently to discover their softer side. In theological terms, I know God is good, and God pours divine goodness into creation, into life, and into human beings. Sometimes you and I have to look for good in order to find it.

You may share this basic theological outlook of life, but perhaps you have not been as naïve about it as I have been. In addition to goodness there is darkness, deceit and evil. What happens when someone you believe in, someone you trust, turns out to be manipulative, treacherous, or even dangerous? What happens when you are looking for the good in someone and suddenly realize that person is a threat to you and to your family?

The truth is... not everyone can be trusted. In the course of life, you and I are going to be tested by *people of the lie*. That is the title of Scott Peck's book about human evil. When we are tested, we have an opportunity to become more aware and to have our eyes opened about human nature. Life's experiences teach us, and so does scripture. Scripture teaches us about the goodness of God and the goodness of creation. It also teaches us about human manipulation, treachery and evil. These three are right here in the Christmas story from Matthew's gospel.

Today's gospel passage is from the "other" gospel. Here there is no mention of a manger scene, angels singing in the sky, or shepherds abiding in the fields.

Matthew's second chapter begins, "In the time of King Herod," and focuses on wise men (astrologers or magi) traveling from the east and following a star to the place where Jesus was born. The author of Matthew's gospel delights in contrasts. These mysterious foreign dignitaries, filled with joy at finding the Christ, fall on their knees and bring him gifts. This is in stark contrast to Herod and the religious leaders who are threatened and remain at a distance. King Herod seeks counsel with the wise men from the east, telling them, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." Do you believe him for one moment? He is deceptive and manipulative. God knows the darkness in his heart, for God warns the magi in a dream not to return to King Herod, but to leave for home by another route.

At this point in the story, *Act One* is complete. You have seen divine goodness in the baby Jesus and in the holy family. You have met the mysterious travelers who bring gifts to the Christ child. Herod, dark and brooding, is off stage plotting to kill Jesus. As *Act Two* opens, God warns Joseph about Herod, and Joseph takes the holy family to safety in Egypt. When Herod realizes he has been tricked, he is furious and orders all the children in Bethlehem two years old and under killed. We remember them as *Holy Innocents*, for they were innocent victims of Herod's evil.

The author of Matthew's gospel has reasons for telling this story this way. Each gospel is shaped by a community. Matthew's community has experienced evil, treachery and darkness in the world. They know what it is like to be called before the powers of the world to testify to their faith and lose their lives because of it. In Matthew's community, people are flocking to know more about the Christ and many of them have no prior knowledge of Judaism. They know nothing about the matriarchs and patriarchs, like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Sarah. Matthew's gospel goes to great lengths to show how events in the Christmas story fulfill Old Testament prophecies.

This morning you might not know anything about the history of Matthew's community at the end of the first century. But you might be very aware of the dynamics of the 21st century. You might know what it is like to be manipulated by a family member or friend. I remember the first time a parishioner told me about being stabbed in the back by a business associate. Being stabbed in the back is a powerful metaphor for trusting someone, calling them a friend, and discovering they have betrayed you. Or you might have known someone who has been drawn into unethical behavior. If you have experienced anything like this, you know how vulnerable it makes you feel.

The preacher and author, Frederick Buechner, says the gospel is always bad news before it is good news. The bad news is there is darkness, deceit, and evil in the world. But there is plenty of Good News in this story from Matthew's gospel.

First, remember that God will always guide us through these treacherous moments of life. It requires discernment to discover the right path. God guided the magi and the holy family away from harm. They listened carefully to God's guidance. Whenever I am seeking discernment in the midst of turmoil, I value having a small group of people around me who will help me listen to God.

There is also Good News in our capacity to stand apart from those who seek to manipulate, control or destroy us. Notice how the wise men and the holy family traveled away from Herod. It is important that we do not surrender ourselves, but *differentiate* ourselves. Select your own path with God's guidance.

And there is Good News when our eyes are opened by these experiences. We learn in human relationships that there is always more going on than meets the eye. There is a bigger picture. I remember David Richards, former chaplain to the House of Bishops said to me: "It is okay to be as gentle as a dove, as long as you are also practicing to be as wise as a serpent."

Jesus grew in wisdom and stature. He learned more about facing human treachery, manipulation, deceit and evil. He always kept his focus on God's goodness and love, and he teaches us to do the same.