

“The Brutal Face of Christmas”

a sermon by

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Text: “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” (Matthew 2:16).

There are two sides of Christmas, a light side and a dark side, and each needs to be seen in relation to the other if we are to understand what God has done in Christ. The light side of Christmas is the good news of great joy. It is people coming home, getting together, sharing, giving, loving, and enjoying the time together.

The dark side is the world in which we live. It is the commercialism that threatens to undo the religious meaning of the season. It is the business and social pressures that squeeze the time and energy out of us that we would have preferred to give to our families. But it is more than that. It is the terrible conflict that continues as Palestinians and Jews destroy one another even in the land where Christ was born. It is the terrible starvation in Dafur, where persecution

and genocide continue while the world looks on. It is the persistent racism and destructive attitudes in our own community as a member of our County Commission describes all urban blacks as living in a “moral sewer.”

When the Gospel of Matthew speaks of the first Christmas, however, it speaks to us honestly about both sides of the thing, as if to say: when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, it was no sentimental affair. Then, as now, there were two sides of Christmas. There was the light side which we love: the tenderness of the birth of a baby, the shepherds and kings that came to the manger where Christ was born, and the choirs of angels that sang of the birth of the savior.

But Matthew reads on, and bids us follow, reminding us of the brutal side of Christmas as well. Matthew tells us that when the wise men went to Herod, seeking the Christ child, Herod told them that he wanted them to return to him and to tell him where the child was so that he also could worship the Christ. But Matthew tells us that the wise men, being warned in a dream, did not return to Herod but went home another way.

Then we read, “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 and under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men” (Matthew 2: 16).

I.

For a number of years scholars have been fascinated with the story of the “Slaughter of the Innocents.” The historian Josephus, who is our principal authority on Herod’s life, does not mention the story at all, though he does mention other atrocities in which Herod was involved. Furthermore, we know that similar legends surround the births of Hercules, Sargon I, Cyrus, Romulus and Remus.

The story, however, is an important reminder to us of this other side of Christmas. Matthew expands his point by means of reference to the Old Testament.

“A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children: she refused to be consoled, because they were no more.” Rachel was the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. She wept when Joseph was sold into slavery and again when Benjamin was given as a hostage.

Ramah was a city north of Jerusalem, on the way to Bethlehem. But it could be our world as well. Rachel represents all the mothers of the world this Christmas in Iraq and in Palestine, in the inner cities of America and in the streets of Darfur. This narrative paints in a vivid way the reality that the world to which Christ was born was a violent and dangerous world and that is something for us to consider during this Christmas season.

II.

Part of the darkness of this season is found in the aftermath of the election of 2004, as our nation again finds itself divided. There are troubling issues that affect our nation today: the debate about moral values, the ongoing war in Iraq, the concern about our economy and the mounting deficits, concerns about health care, education, and the plight of our inner cities--just to name a few.

Yet troubling as these may be, these are not the things that trouble me the most. What is most troubling to me is the sense of weariness that I find in many Americans today. I wonder if we have not lost a sense of hope and confidence in our ability to solve the problems that we face today. Several years ago I came across the *Memoirs* of Former Secretary of State Dean Rusk, a Davidson College graduate and Rhodes Scholar, who served as Secretary of State under President John F. Kennedy and President Lyndon Johnson. One of the chapters that caught my interest was Rusk's description of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, which occurred when the United States discovered that the Soviet Union had placed nuclear missiles in Cuba--only ninety miles from the coast of Florida. The American President demanded that the missiles be disassembled and sent back to Russia. During this crisis the world was as close to all out nuclear war as it has ever been. Rusk remembers that all the ICBMs were readied for launch, and that all the B-52s were in the air. During these tense moments Rusk said he remembered a question to the catechism that he had learned as a small boy in a Presbyterian Church in Cherokee County Georgia. It was the first question of the Shorter Catechism: "What is man's chief end?" What is life all about?

That is a basic human question and it is one that for us is rooted in our belief that we are not part of a blind cosmos hurtling through space without any direction or guidance, but that the basic truth about our lives is that we are created by God, redeemed by our Lord Jesus Christ, and that nothing can separate us from this love.

I, for one, do not believe that God has placed us on this planet to be destroyed by terrorists who fly airplanes into buildings. I do not believe that God has placed us on this planet to destroy the air we breathe or the water we drink. Our faith tells us something more. It tells us that we are called to be the children of God.

In his classic biography of Winston Churchill, entitled *The Last Lion: Alone 1932-1940*, William Manchester describes that fateful night in May 1940 when Winston Churchill was summoned to Buckingham Palace by King George VI and asked to form a national government to lead the British people against the imminent threat of a German invasion. King George did not want Churchill to lead this government. He would have preferred someone less strident. But the King knew that Winston Churchill was the only person in England that could do it. Churchill had predicted everything that happened. That night, as Churchill returned to his home from the palace, he wrote in his diary that he felt as if "he were walking with destiny and that all his past

life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial.” He had spent years in the House of Commons in political wilderness. He had been ridiculed, rebuked, laughed at, and ignored. But now everything that he had predicted had come true.

Once, when asked if he had been the one to give England the courage to stand against its oppressors, Churchill argued that he was not the lion. It was, he said, the people who were the lion. His job was only to give the road.

That is the kind of confidence and hope that we need to recover for today. It is not confidence and hope that is built on being a super power, or even confidence and hope that is built on our own inherent goodness. It is confidence that is built in our belief in a sovereign and gracious God.

III.

Then, too, part of the darkness of this season is found in the collapse of leadership that has become an epidemic in our society. One of the deep problems of our society is that we can no longer distinguish between a celebrity and a saint. Christopher Lasch has suggested that “in a culture of narcissism, celebrities are welcome because we lack courage and imagination.” It isn’t just the basketball players who go into the stands after the fans. Nor is it simply the politicians who are willing to suspend the ethical rules of the House of Representative to protect one of their own. It is in this “culture of celebrities” that we can no longer distinguish individuals who are willing to make sacrifices and be authentic role models for young people today.

Some time ago I came across an article in *Sports Illustrated* by Rick Reilly, entitled “A Paragon Rising Above the Madness.” It was a tribute to John Wooden, who for many years was the basketball coach at UCLA, surely one of the finest men to ever coach basketball. His teams won 10 NCAA championships, the last in 1975. He won 88 straight games between January 30, 1971, and January 17, 1974. John Wooden was a straight-laced person, loyal to one woman, one school, one way of coaching. Each year he would spend the first half hour of practice teaching his players the correct way to put on athletic socks. “Wrinkles,” he said, “can lead to blisters,” he would warn his players, much to their chagrin.

If you played for him, you played by his rules. “Never lie. Never cheat. Never steal. Never score without acknowledging a teammate.” One word of profanity and you were done for the day. John Wooden believed hopelessly in things that never did anything except win championships. No dribbling behind the back or through the legs. “There’s no need in it,” he said. He also did not allow long hair or facial hair. That really drove a lot of the players crazy. One day, one of his players, an All American center named Bill Walton showed up for practice with a full beard. “It’s my right,” he insisted. Wooden asked him if he believed that strongly. Walton said he did. “That’s good, Bill” said Coach Wooden. “I admire people who have strong beliefs and stick by them, I really do. We’re going to miss you.” Walton shaved it right then and there. Now he calls his former coach once a week to tell him he loves him.

There is nothing our society needs more today than individuals who can provide the kind of leadership that ennobles and encourages our society. We need leaders with courage, compassion, and authentic commitment. When Nelson Mandela was arrested by white South Africans, he told the court: "Ending apartheid is a cause for which I would gladly die." Mandela spent 27 years in prison, saw apartheid end, and became the first black president of South Africa.

As we come to Christmas this year, we must never forget those for whom this season brings great sorrow and suffering. But we must also commit ourselves to those things which will bring a more just society and a compassionate society so that "swords will be beat into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks, and nations will not lift up swords against nations, nor shall they learn war any more."

Amen!