

"Salvation and Slaughter"
Sermon for the First Sunday after Christmas
Lectionary Year A
December 30, 2007
Text: Matthew 2:13-23
Dr. David T. Howeth

Matthew, the writer of the *Gospel* which bears his name, was a Jewish rabbi who became convinced that the best way to be a faithful Jew was to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Rabbi Matthew had a small congregation of fellow believers in Jesus, and they practiced together their own rather unique brand of Christianity, one that was completely faithful to Jewish traditions and at the same time, obedient to the teachings of Christ.

We can't know exactly what prompted Matthew to write his *Gospel* or what his original purpose was in doing so. One thing we do know for sure, that Matthew wrote his *Gospel* for a particular congregation. He wrote it for his own church. He wrote it to address the needs, the concerns, and the questions of the people he had grown to care about as Christian brothers and sisters. He wrote his words with real people in mind, people much like you and me.

You can bet that like us, those people *had* needs, concerns, and questions, lots of them. As I read each passage of scripture in the *Gospel* of Matthew, I like to imagine the particular question that the passage was written to address. I like to picture some person in Matthew's church—perhaps an elderly man, maybe a middle-aged woman, perhaps a newly-wedded couple, maybe a teenager or even a child—raising his or her hand in a Sunday School class and saying, "Rabbi Matthew, what about such and such?" Matthew would think for a moment and then begin to tell a story, a story from the life and ministry of Jesus.

And so I can imagine that in Rabbi Matthew's Sunday School class, someone has just raised a hand to ask this question, "How does God work in the world?" It's a good question, a question I've asked, and I know you have too. How does God work in the world? And how does Rabbi Matthew answer that question? He tells a story that begins like this, "Now after the three wise men 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."

In Rabbi Matthew's congregation, this story would have had a familiar ring to it, because it has elements of another story, one much older, about another baby well-known to the members of Matthew's little church of Christian Jews. An insecure and threatened ruler seeks to put his fears to rest by killing innocent babies. Many babies are slaughtered by his decree. But one baby, through the providence of God, is saved. Sound like something you've heard before? It was the story of the baby Moses, and now it is the story of the baby Jesus.

The similarity of the stories is no accident. It's part of Matthew's desire to help his congregation see that for them, *Jesus is the new Moses*, the new lawgiver, sent by God to guide them toward being the faithful Jews God has called them to be by being disciples of Christ.

How does God work in the world? That is the question, and Rabbi Matthew responds to this question of how God works in the world with a rather shocking, startling, and scandalous story. It's a story of both slaughter and salvation, of destruction and deliverance. Why would Matthew choose such a story? It's as if he is saying to the person asking the question, "So you want to know about how God works in the world? Well, let's first make sure we understand clearly what the world is like. Then, and only then, can we appreciate the need for God to be doing something in the world and how God goes about doing what he does."

The world is an environment in which the slaughter of innocent people occurs every day. In several places on the other side of the world this morning there is a war going on, and the result of war is always the same: soldiers are not the only ones killed. Innocent people die in war too, and some, including infants, die in the name of ethnic cleansing, a process not unlike what King Herod was engaged in. And somewhere just down the street, someone is being victimized for no apparent reason. Those of us who feel strongly about the issue of abortion would be quick to point to that practice as a way in which we slaughter the innocent in our society.

But abortion is certainly not the only way in which the innocent are at risk in our culture. The use of drugs and the abuse of alcohol can result in the death of innocent persons. In addition to

terrorism, violent crimes such as armed robbery, school shootings, neighborhood drive-by killings, rapes and other types of assault put innocent people in peril. As we continue to protect our handguns, we see the number of accidental shootings increase, situations in which innocent people are injured or killed. Domestic violence is perhaps also more prevalent now than ever, physically and emotionally scarring women and children for life. We can't pick up a daily newspaper and not be confronted with the many ways death and destruction, the slaughter of innocents, goes on all around us.

But there are other, more subtle and less obviously evil ways in which our society destroys innocent people's lives. Our greed and insatiable appetites cause us to horde the world's resources so that we are constantly filled while others go hungry and starve to death. Our desire to purchase material goods at the lowest possible price drives our companies to build manufacturing plants in underprivileged countries, so that cheap labor can be employed, putting our own citizens out of work and helping the people in those other countries to remain in poverty. In some cases in our society we also may well be causing some innocent people to be denied much needed federal assistance and especially adequate health care. And our corporations are so controlled by the bottom line that they don't think twice about slaughtering the family life of their employees for the sake of the company and laying people off, especially older workers, at the drop of a hat or a percentage point.

We live in a world and in a country and in a community in which the slaughter of innocent people *does* take place. We read about it, we hear about it, and in some cases we are confronted with it in our own lives. Matthew wants his congregation and ours to remember, I think, to keep foremost in our minds, the reality that our world is one in which there are evil people like Herod and evil institutions like his government that make the destruction of innocent lives a possibility every day.

But that is not all that Rabbi Matthew wants his congregation and ours to keep in mind. That is the way the world is, but *it is precisely in the midst of life in this world that God does work to bring about salvation*. Yes, slaughter occurs, but so does salvation. Yes, destruction takes place, but so does deliverance. Yes, evil is real and present and potent. *But so is God and the good God brings about*. Matthew would have his congregation recognize that God's will triumphs against the worst evil we can

imagine. What could be worse than the systematic killing of babies? Yet in the midst of this tragedy of huge proportions, the savior of the world is spared through the intervention of God.

I realize that you know about slaughter, but I also understand that you know about salvation. You've seen it all around you as well. Think back on the year that has come to a close. Reflect on 2007 for a moment. It's always a good idea right before New Year's Eve. Think about the times you have had a close call, a near miss, a lucky break. Think about the things that did not turn out as badly for you as you had imagined. Think about the test results that came back negative, the illness that did not become as serious as you feared, the surgery that was successful, the person you love who was snatched from the jaws of death.

Think about the relationship that was salvaged, the misunderstanding that was worked through, the reconciliation that took place with someone near and dear to you. Think about the unexplainable coincidences that happened, those small but significant miracles of timing that gave you just what you needed at just the time you needed it. Think of the many wonderful, joyous, fulfilling moments that occurred in your life this year. Think about how, even in the midst of the worst of circumstances, you have felt the grace of God and the love of family and friends. Think of all the ways you have experienced salvation in 2007 and celebrate the presence of God and the way God has worked in your world.

We live in a world marked by both slaughter *and* salvation. That is just the way it is. The Bible helps us to see that this is the way it always has been. Because the world is this way, we have some choices as to how we live in the world. *We can choose our perspective, our attitude, our viewpoint on the world.* We can ignore salvation and see only slaughter. That's one choice, and quite frankly, it is a pretty easy choice to make. The news media is certainly helpful at this point, because slaughter sells much better than salvation. We can see only the bad and forget about the good, and when we do we can become hardened, angry, resentful, cynical, and worst of all, we can lose our sense of hope.

On the other hand, we can choose to ignore slaughter and see only salvation. We can live in denial of the evil around us, making believe it doesn't exist. We can explain it away or work with some

kind of simplistic approach to it. We can maintain positive mental attitudes at all times. There is some advantage to this perspective, and it is better in many ways than the first attitude. I'd rather be around a person who sees only the good in life than I would a person who sees only the bad.

But the person whose take on the world only has room for salvation and not slaughter, may be a person who becomes insensitive, unsympathetic, and worst of all, a person who lacks compassion. Compassion means to suffer with, and we can only suffer with someone if we realize that the world is a place where suffering occurs. Only keeping the reality of slaughter in mind, as well as the reality of salvation, helps us to reach out in care and concern for those whose lives have been touched by destruction of some sort.

So we have the choice of seeing only slaughter and losing hope or seeing only salvation and losing compassion. But there is another option, the one Rabbi Matthew may be offering to his congregation and to us in and through this story. *It is the option of genuine faith, authentic trust in the God who works to bring about salvation even in and especially in a world where there is slaughter.* It is faith that has compassion for all those mothers in and around Bethlehem whose babies were not spared a horrible death. It is faith that wails and weeps and laments over the momentary victories that evil seems to gain over goodness. It is faith that shows care and concern for all those innocent people in our world who are made to suffer because our human freedom allows us the opportunity to bring about death and destruction in their lives.

But it is also faith that refuses to give up hope, because it continues to trust in the providence of God. Evil may have its day, but God always triumphs in the end. Slaughter may take place short term, but salvation is what occurs long term. Destruction can never completely overcome deliverance. What is bad in our world can never ultimately win its war against the goodness of God. As we come to the conclusion of another year in our lives and prepare to turn the page on our calendars to 2008, may we be people of genuine and authentic faith, being assured that our God works in the world to bring about salvation even in the midst of slaughter.