

FIRST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS | JANUARY 1, 2023

ISAIAH 63:7-9 | PSALM 148 | HEBREWS 2:10-18 | MATTHEW 2:13-23

I was at a bookstore the other day, and I came across this big rack of books in the back from the *Who Is?* series. If you're not familiar with these, they're biographies that are written for kids. They're pretty short, maybe fifty pages or so. They give you some of the major points of someone's life. And because they're written for kids, they often focus on important events from the person's childhood.

It's not a bad way to understand the gospels. Around the time of the early church, there was this genre of literature called *bios*. As you probably guessed, this is the root of our word "biography," writings about someone's life. So in the same way that you could read or listen to Matthew's biography about Jesus, you could hear someone's biography about Caesar Augustus or Aristotle or whomever.

And these biographies tended to put a lot of emphasis on people's upbringing. They had lots of stories from their childhood that communicated something important about who this person was. So just to take an example of this, if you had a biography of someone like Janet Yellen, it would probably have stories about her running a lemonade stand as a kid and how she was unusually good at managing money. And you'd think, *Yea, this person's childhood really helps me understand who they became later in life.*

What's interesting about the gospels is that they have relatively little of that. Today's reading from Matthew's gospel is the only story he gives us from Jesus's childhood. Jesus is born. And then this story happens. And then the next time Jesus shows up, he's about my age. So a story from Jesus's childhood is like Chevok's gun on the wall. It's not just there to fill space or set the mood. It's there because of something important that's going to happen later. So what do we learn about Jesus in this story?

First, we learn something about the world as it is. Namely, we learn that Jesus shares our experience of life. There's a great painting, it's either at the Met or the Cloisters, of the annunciation to Mary. The angel Gabriel is about to speak to Mary, who has her nose buried in a book. And if you look up in the window, there's a cherubic figure surrounded by rays of light who is supposed to represent the Holy Spirit. And that little figure is holding a cross.

That's making the same point as Matthew's story. No sooner is Jesus born than he's thrust into a world of conflict and division and danger. Jesus doesn't have the option of choosing whether to live a life that puts him in danger or not. From his birth, he is vulnerable. At the mercy of other people's decisions.

We could say that Jesus is born into a world shaped by universal sin. A world formed by our tendencies to shrink away from faith in God and love for neighbor, oftentimes with very negative consequences. And, because this always comes up, to say that Jesus or any child lives in a world of universal sin isn't to say that kids are bad. The point is that children are always being shaped by the forces around them.

Sometimes those forces are really subtle. They're unspoken norms or systemic issues that we take for granted and don't really think about. Sometimes those forces are obvious. A couple of years ago, we had some people here from our synod's Bosnia mission trip team who work with kids and families who lived in Bosnia in the early 90s. And one of the things

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH

777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481

(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

they talked about was how much trauma gets embedded in these kids. They live in the world other people created. And so does Jesus.

But what's remarkable about Jesus is that even though he lives in a world of constant temptations to violence and retribution, cynicism or hatred, he never gives into it. Jesus lives in a world shaped by sin and death, and yet he never gives into the power of evil in his ministry. Even when faced with death, Jesus always invites us to new life.

So from the very beginning of his life, Matthew's Jesus is someone who is in the thick of it with us. God with us, not just when we're doing well or basking in our glory. But God with us when we're in the mess of life, too.

Second, we learn something about the world to come. Namely, we learn something about what Jesus is going to do. It helps to remember here that Matthew's gospel was written to Jewish believers in the church. So Matthew will often use little pieces of Jewish tradition to make a point. Sometimes these are subtle enough that they're easy to miss for people like you and me. But other times, they're clear as day. You can imagine them with flashing lights and arrows around them. And this gospel story is one of those.

When Herod sets out to kill all the children, where do Mary and Joseph flee to? Egypt. In the Hebrew Bible, Egypt is the place you go when you're out of good options. Nobody wants to go to Egypt. Egypt is the place you go when you don't have a choice. Abraham and Sarah go to Egypt when there's a famine. Joseph's brothers go to Egypt when they run out of food at home. And now Mary and Joseph flee to Egypt when their home isn't safe. So we're calling to mind all of those times when God's people were oppressed.

And who is the other character from the Hebrew Bible who resides in Egypt? It's Moses. Moses is born at a time when Pharaoh wants all the male Israelite children killed, just like Herod, but he grows up to liberate his people from slavery in Egypt and lead them toward the promised land.

So Matthew wants his readers, and that includes us, to think of Jesus in terms of Moses. Like Moses, Jesus was born under oppression. And like Moses, he will liberate his people. And where Moses liberated his people from the wrath of the Egyptians, Jesus will liberate us from the power of sin and death.

That is, of course, getting a little bit ahead of ourselves. Jesus is just a few days old and already we're talking about his death and resurrection. But the whole point of this story about Jesus's childhood is that when we're talking about God's love poured out for us in Jesus, we're never getting ahead of ourselves. That the Spirit of God that raises Jesus from the power of death, is the same Spirit that is present in the life of this vulnerable child and the same Spirit that enlivens our common witness.

Jesus may be just a child, Matthew tells us, but today and always, Jesus is leading us out of Egypt and into the kingdom of heaven.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor