

Let us pray.

O God of Love, O God of Truth;

Let us say strong things gently and gentle things strongly.

Let us speak the truth in love to all
and love the truth that lives in each.

Let us hear the truth as we each need it and live that truth.

O God, we heed it through Jesus; Your Word & our Lord.

Amen.

Rescuing Jesus

Matthew 2:13-16

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, 'Get up and flee to Egypt. Take your child and his mother and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is searching for your child to destroy him. So Joseph got up and took his family in the middle of the night and went to Egypt where they remained till Herod's death. This was to fulfill what was written, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

Now when Herod saw that he'd been tricked by the Magi, he was enraged and sent his soldiers to kill all the children around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the timing he had learned from the Magi. This was to fulfill what had been written by Jeremiah, 'Weeping and mourning were heard from Ramah. It was Rachael weeping for her dead children, refusing to be consoled.'"

For one of my college roommates there was a fine line between his Christian faith and his love for the Boston Bruins.

He was fond to say, **“Jesus saves, and Bobby Orr scores on the rebound.”**

Salvation - isn't that the goal of our religion?
And certainly one of the liveliest debates amongst believers is “Saved from what?”

Saved from sin? Saved from fear and insecurity?

Saved from one's addictions or other self-destructive habits?

Saved from cancer or pain or suffering?

Saving our children? Our marriages? Our souls?

Saving our planet? Our society?

Being saved from hell or all our own little hells on earth?

The other day I was reading about a fellow who recently converted to Christianity because he swears Jesus appeared to him right when he was about to commit suicide and saved him.

Powerful stuff. Hard to debate.

For him, salvation wasn't theological or conceptual.

It was real.

What is your version of salvation?

From what are you hoping to be saved?

And if you're not in church for that, then presumably you are here to help save someone, or some community or our planet. Otherwise, why are you here?

There are so many different versions of what salvation means, but most would agree, Salvation is the goal of Jesus.

And currently, in our day & age, that goal is being attacked more viciously than Bobby Orr could ever imagine!

Under the banner of “Church”,

many Christians are practicing a brand of religion that bears little resemblance to the biblical Jesus-faith.

Prejudice, hatred, elitism, materialism, nationalism, division are proliferating like never before, in the name of Jesus.

And recent “Freedom of Religion” legislation makes it increasingly legal for Christians to do un-Christian things and call it Christianity.

Our bible story this morning unveils an important irony of our faith; Jesus might save. But Jesus also needs saving.

In other words, our Jesus-faith - the one we find in the Gospels needs defending on 3 fronts with every ounce of our protection.

The 1st defense is for LOVE.

Our's is a faith based upon love.

Now admittedly, love is a many splendor-ed thing and there are many versions of love.

But at the root of what we believe is that Jesus is God's love made flesh; and his love should always be OUR starting place for how we also should love.

Alas, that's not where many Christians start.

Jane gave me permission to share what she witnessed on her cruise last week.

It so happened that Jewish schools were off last week too, so well over 2000 of those on board the cruise were Jewish. And Jane was horrified at the anti-Semitism she saw & heard. It was blatant and unapologetic.

Complaints about wearing yarmulkes, having too many children, speaking in Hebrew, needing special foods - were constant and demeaning. And Jane checked - those doing much of the demeaning were proud Christians.

The earliest Christians - those who started the 1st C. church were looked upon by the non-believers all round them like this.

“Look how they love” they said in amazement.

Nowadays, condemnation, prejudice, racism, judgmental-ism, superiority have replaced Christian love and it takes action like Joseph's to defend it.

No matter how much it disturbs our status quo, we must save the love of God in order to save our world.

After our defense of love, a 2nd defense must be for GRACE.

And one of the major ways to mount that defense is in how the bible gets interpreted.

Instead of seeing Jesus main message as Gospel- good news, many read it and study it ungraciously.

They attempt to understand it literally.

And then they use it legalistically - like the scales of law
and the hammer of punishment
to bash certain populations like LGBTQ sisters and brothers,
like interfaith populations,
like secularists.

And in so doing, they end up worshipping a book
more than they do the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

I find it interesting that Joseph flees to Egypt.

The name "Egypt" means "**The narrow place**".

While Moses and the Israelites fled FROM Egypt
because it was a place of narrow-mindedness, rigidity
and oppression.

But in our bible story this morning,
Joseph FLEES TO Egypt.

What's that all about?

I think it shows us what people do when they are afraid.
When they feel threatened for their loved ones and lifestyles,
they often escape to narrowness, they opt for rigidity,
they resort to law.

Remember how the Israelites complained to Moses
after being exposed to the hardships of the wilderness,

*"Why did you liberate us **HERE**?"*

It would have been better if we stayed in Egypt"

A narrow place is often where fearful people flee.

Psychologically, it is sometimes true
that people who have escaped great threat, abuse and suffering,
often end up being rigid, legalistic and narrow-minded,

in their parenting, in their politics and in their religion.

But a place of narrowness is not a place of faithfulness; especially when it comes to the bible.

In his New York Times best selling book, *Stealing Jesus* Bruce Bawer says that fundamentalism betrays Christianity by worshiping law, praising control-ism and judging others with prejudice and violence.

As an antidote, Bawer refers to St. Paul who said in his letter to the Romans, Christians are freed from worshiping law because Christ has saved them by Grace. Grace has replaced law. Grace has replaced legalism. Grace has replaced control-ism.

So, if the bible shouldn't be interpreted literally or legally how should we interpret it?

Well, look at how Matthew interprets scripture in our story. He attaches "the massacre of the innocents" to an ancient piece of scripture from 500 years before.

*"This is the fulfill what was spoken by Jeremiah:
Wailing and lamentation was heard in Ramah.
It was Rachael weeping for her children because
they were no more."*

Who was Rachael? She was the mother of Joseph & Benjamin. And the weeping wasn't BY her, it was FOR her, because she died in childbirth - and was buried in Ramah, a town not far from Bethlehem.

It's pretty obvious that Matthew doesn't use scripture literally or historically.

His interpretation is the loosest and most symbolic interpretation of scripture in the entire New Testament.

But that's OK.

Because that is how Gospel speaks best; symbolically, metaphorically, poetically.

Scripture is meant to be expansive, not narrow.

As expansive as the grace of God through Jesus Christ; and we need to defend that grace AND LIVE BY IT.

And that nicely leads us to the 3rd defense.

Now when Herod saw that he'd been tricked by the Magi, he was enraged and sent his soldiers to kill all the children around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the timing he had learned from the Magi.

This story is entitled "**The massacre of the innocents**".

Now, if we approached this as history, we'd be on shaky ground because no where else in any other document, secular or religious, does this event appear.

This doesn't mean it didn't happen, but it's historicity is questionable.

But if we interpret it as symbolic then this story happens all the time. This story is happening right now writ large. Whenever the voracious pursuit of power is allowed to happen innocence gets murdered, purity is killed, truth dies.

Whenever figures like Herod are allowed to thrive:
people who connive, who lie, who ignore morality,
and use and abuse others.

In politics, in police departments, in programs like the
boy scouts, in business, in the military,
there will always be Herods who massacre innocence,
kill humility, trample on purity, and murder honesty
all to achieve and maintain power.

And let's not forget the church.

In Feb. of the year 380 AD,
Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.
In one fell swoop all the power, all the authority
all the wealth - everything for which King Herod lusted -
was suddenly bestowed upon the church.

From that moment onward,
our beloved Christianity was henceforth a threat to itself.
Henceforth the Jesus-faith was in need of rescue
from it's own believers.

The love of Jesus needed defending,
the grace of Jesus needed defending,
the innocent pure truth of Jesus needed defending.

Wherever the unrelenting pursuit of power was allowed,
the Jesus-faith needs defending.

In closing, if you love children and babies,
you should love this story about Joseph rescuing Jesus.

So, I was looking for a sermon closing,
and my eyes wandered to the photos on my desk.

They were baby pictures of our grandchildren when they were
about one month old.

Sloane is waving "Hi". Ian is sound asleep on my chest.

And I thought, "That's it!"

In so many ways our Jesus faith is as vulnerable as children.

As needy as infants.

The very power in the Christian story to bring salvation
is the same power that calls us to save it,

to defend it, to protect it,

so it can sleep in security and say "Hi" to the future.

Prayer of Pastoral Care Feb 5 2023 Epiphany 5

Psalm 71(1,3) says, *in you, O LORD, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame... a strong fortress, to save me; for you are my rock.* Our prayer response is:
O God of all creation, be our hope and trust.

God of all goodness, we live in times of stress and controversy, injustice, and cruelty. At times we cry to you for rescue, and remember that we have leaned on you since our birth as we pray, **O God of all creation, be our hope and trust.**

We pray for leaders and nations around the world, that they may seek justice and peace. We pray for the people of Ukraine, for their medical care in times of great stress under bombardment of hospitals and communities. Be with the people of Myanmar and in other areas of civil and violent conflict. We rejoice in the visit of Pope Francis to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We lift up all victims of violence and unjust conditions in the State of Israel between Israelis and Palestinian in that land.
O God of all creation, be our hope and trust.

We pray for the church in all its forms, that we may be the love you want for all people. We thank you for missionaries who serve among peoples of many cultures and needs. May we support them wholeheartedly for their service in your name. We give thanks for the Multicultural Night this past Wednesday presented by Arlington Memorial Chinese Club under the direction of their teacher & Dorset Church Member, Annabelle Liu. May we honor the gifts of the many cultures of your people.
O God of all creation, be our hope and trust.

We pray for all affected by the bitter cold, all who are homeless, for people and animals without shelter or warmth. We pray for any trapped by natural disasters; embrace them with your calm, and send them relief. We pray for those who are ill or suffering. May all who face the challenges of addiction know that they do not face life alone.
O God of all creation, be our hope and trust.

We lift before you those on this church's immediate needs list. ...

God our Wisdom, enable us to be humble and kind in all things. Remind us that, whatever the issue, today we know only in part. Even now faith, hope, and love abide; and the greatest of these is love. Help us to be like you, Love; through Jesus, our savior and friend. Amen.

OFFERING Friends, let us love not only in our words but also in our deeds through the tithes and offerings that we give today.

***DOXOLOGY**

***PRAYER** O God, bless the gifts that we have given as expressions of our love for you and our neighbors. May they help bring closer to fulfillment your kingdom, your reign, of peace and love; through Jesus, our Sovereign and Lord. Amen.