

MOTHERS WHO WEEP FOR PEACE

Matthew 2

2nd Sunday of Advent, December 10, 2006/La Paz, Mexico/Crossroads

When people zero in on the Christmas Story in the Bible, they usually conjure up warm, fuzzy images: Mary and Joseph surrounding the baby Jesus cuddled in a manger of hay. Warm, wooly sheep baaing around the hillside while glorious angels appear to the shepherds. Three majestic magi bowing before the Christ child, presenting him with magnificent gifts.

But our Gospel reading from Matthew, chapter 2, this morning, leaves us with some different, and very disturbing images. In the midst of all the glory of Jesus' birth, there is the story of a King who is mentally disturbed, and who will go to any lengths to protect his sphere of influence.

By craft and cunning, King Herod attempts to get the magi to reveal to him where this new king will be born. The magi reveal the few facts that they know. If and when they find this child, the magi are urged to come back with a detailed map so that King Herod can also go and worship this child. But God warns the magi in a dream to go home a different route, and so the king's evil plans are temporarily diffused.

But Herod doesn't give up. When the magi fail to return, and he realizes they've actually outwitted him, he's furious. So he decides to send out his own search party for this baby who threatens to usurp his throne. A search party with deadly intent. He commissions his soldiers to Bethlehem with orders to kill all the boys who were two years old and younger. Thus, Herod's order gives this story a time sequence. The magi visited Herod, found Jesus, and returned to their home sometime between Jesus' birth and his second birthday.

At this point, God warns Joseph in a dream to flee with Mary and Jesus to Egypt. And as they flee, the soldiers march into Bethlehem. And mothers begin to weep for their slain children. The peace of their community shattered.

These dark, terror-filled, grief-stricken images somehow don't seem to coincide with what we usually hear at Christmas time. And yet, here they are, staring us in the face. *Peace on Earth, Good Will to Men* smashed into tiny pieces by the destructive fury of one power-possessed King.

Did Mary know? As she fled to Egypt, clutching Jesus to her breast, did she know that other mothers, other women she had met during her two years in Bethlehem, were sacrificing their sons so that hers might live? Was her heart crying out in anguish to God: "I don't understand! I thought the Messiah meant Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Even as we sit here this morning, in our temporarily safe bubble of peace and security in La Paz, Mexico, mothers—like Mary and the mothers of Bethlehem—continue to weep around the world.

Sweet Honey in the Rock, an a-cappella African American Women's group, sings a song entitled *Women Gather*. One verse says this:

People say
Not in this neighborhood, that doesn't happen here
Our kids have everything, what do we have to fear
But what about the ones who say this happens everyday
Drugs and violence take our children
How much more death can come our way?

The women gather cryin' tears that fill a million oceans
It doesn't matter where you're livin'
The women gather cryin' tears that fill a million oceans

Don't you know? (Album: *The Women Gather*, 2003, by Sweet Honey in the Rock)

Mary's fears, Mary's terror, Mary's flight, Mary's grief are still alive today. Women know.

I grew up in the Cold War era. The threat of nuclear war was a fear that my generation knew as children. Nightmares were images of that huge mushroom cloud enveloping our planet and wiping out all life. The word bomb was quickly assimilated into our vocabulary. But then, our relationship with the then Soviet Union changed. We saw what seemed insurmountable barriers be overcome. The Berlin wall broken down. The Israeli\Palestinian Peace Accord in 1994 between Begin, Rabin, and Arafat. And I felt a glimmer of hope that my children would grow up in an era of peace. The fear of someone pushing that infamous red button, would not be a part of their childhood nightmares.

And then a bomb pierced my self-made cocoon. This was six years before 9/11. It was a bomb in Oklahoma City. The heartland of America. April 19, 1995. A day when destruction and tragedy was at my front door. Not across the world in some other country like Sarajevo, Bosnia, Rwanda, Northern Ireland, or the Middle East. I was watching people just like me struggle with disaster and grief.

People who were just like me. They were not in some misunderstood part of the world. They did not look different than me, speak a different language, or practice a different religion. They were not strung out on drugs or members of violent gangs. These bleeding, grieving, shell-shocked people were me. And so, that April, as I sat on my couch and hugged my children close, I also saw myself. And I wept.

It brought the reality of war into my side of the hemisphere. It helped me bridge the gap of glazed superficiality that had begun to be my attitude after years of viewing countless atrocities in other parts of the world. It was no longer over there in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, or the Slavic countries. Their suffering had finally become my people's suffering. I could finally see them not through eyes of pity, not through eyes of compassion, but as brothers and sisters, fighting for peace in an unjust world.

Today, as we sit here, war still persists in many parts of our world. The war in Iraq rages on. Today an Iraqi soldier will die. An American or British soldier will die. A Muslim insurgent will die. Someone's father. Someone's son. Someone's brother, uncle, nephew, cousin. And a mother will weep. A family will grieve. And a part of me wants to curl up in a ball and ignore this truth.

Instead, I want to sit at the foot of the manger and gaze upon baby Jesus' holy little face, and pretend that all is good in the world. All is lovely. All is at peace. But then God drags me to the scene of Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus fleeing to Egypt. Soldiers are marching into Bethlehem. And I realize that danger is always just around the corner. Mothers are weeping for their children. Mothers are weeping for peace.

I don't want to go to those places. I don't want my heart to be broken over and over. And yet, God asks me to open my eyes, to open my heart, and to see. To witness the grief of others around me with authenticity.

Virginia Stem Owens has said, "We come into this world with our fingers curled and only slowly, by repeated practice, do we learn to open our hands. It takes a great deal of dying to get us ready to live."

Look at your hands.

Are your fingers unclenched, your hands open?

Or are your fingers curled, your hands closed?

How much more dying do we need to experience?

Jesus tells us, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." These are the words to cling to. For I realize that if I continue to put my hope in the peace efforts of human beings, I will continually be disappointed, and even more so, afraid. But if I put my hope in the peace efforts of God, then I will be a spiritual survivor.

Max Lucado, in his book *No Wonder They Call Him Savior*, said, "The next time you are called to suffer, pay attention. It may be the closest you ever get to God. It could very well be that the hand that extends itself to lead you out of the fog is a pierced one." Human suffering and tragedy bring out our survival skills. It is a time when our defenses are down and when we are often brought to our knees before God. Scripture, the community of believers, sharing with other sufferers, can all be a source of strength and encouragement. But it is not an easy road. Spiritual survival is a learned skill. We have all seen Christians fall by the wayside when the hard times come. The pierced hand of Christ reached out, and they did not grab hold.

To persevere with God through whatever crises comes along is the challenge of my faith. To learn to accept that I may not find answers, or closure to all of life's injustices. So where is my hope? My peace? I know that one day, when I enter into the presence of God, God will make

sense of my suffering and the suffering of all other injustices in the world. That is my hope, and my peace in an age when my children still have to learn the word bomb.

II Corinthians 4:8-9, 16-18 says, "*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed . . . Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*"

An eternal glory. Spiritual survivors are also Kingdom people. We live in the already, with the hope of the yet to come. A time when God's vision for his people will come to fruition.

Isaiah, chapter 65 says:

Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. Never again will there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them. Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy in all my holy mountain says the Lord. (vs. 17-25)

This is God's view of peace. This is the peace "not of the world" that Jesus offers each of us. A peace where children do not die, where there are no more tears, where enemies lay down next to one another. A peace that calls us out of ourselves, out of our ethnocentric fears, to embrace others as children of God. A peace that is possible because Jesus died on the cross and broke down the barriers that separate us from God and from each other.

My peace I give unto you.

It's a peace that the world cannot give.

It's a peace that the world does not understand.

Peace to know.

Peace to live.

My peace I give unto you.

Amen.

