

Regal Blood

Mathew 2:1-18

This morning we are dealing with a bittersweet passage of scripture. The sweet part ends with verse 11; the bitter part begins with verse 12. In this holy and gracious season, we usually end with the sweet part and ignore the bitter, but today we shall read the whole passage in its entirety.

This practice is reminiscent of the Pastor who was leading an adult Bible study and said, “Ladies and Gentlemen, now we come to verse 35, the most difficult verse in the entire New Testament. So let’s quickly move on to verse 36.”

I’m tempted to issue a warning – much as the broadcast media did before showing the graphic pictures of Saddam Hussein’s execution yesterday; but suffice it to say that this passage is R rated material since God’s Incarnation – his coming in Christ – happened in the midst of a harsh and violent time.

Introduction: More to the Story

Now all is quiet, the commotion is quelled, the turmoil has subsided. The choir of angels has winged its way back to heavenly realms, the lowly shepherds have return to their anxious sheep, and all who had gone to be enrolled in the city of David have now left Bethlehem to return to their own homes in neighboring regions. The holy night is over, the Child is born, and it would seem that the drama is complete. In point of fact, we are ready for it to be over. We have taken down Christmas, we have put away the decorations, many of us have cast the fir tree onto the deck where it sits waiting for trash pickup, and most of all we have welcomed back our days of routine: the Christmas guests departed, the house back in order.

Yet there is one more scene of the Incarnation drama yet to be played, for today we find ourselves in the in-between time, between Christmas on December 25 and Epiphany on January 6. Tradition has it that the Wise Men—the three Eastern Kings—arrived later than all the others, and we mark that occasion as Epiphany, when the divinity of Christ became manifest to the Gentiles, as represented by the Magi from the East.

Vile Regal Blood

At long last, they approached Jerusalem, eager and excited, their spirits full of expectation. They asked everyone they met the very same question, “Where is he who is born King of the Jews?” While no one knew the answer, the Magi certainly attracted widespread attention. Somewhat troubled they entered the gates of the city, where their reputation had preceded them. They were immediately met and escorted to the palace of Herod the King, who inquired about their purpose and asked why Judea should be honored by a visit from such dignitaries. They told him of the star and inquired about the birth of the child, the King of the Jews.

Herod must have worked hard to conceal his rage. To those who knew him intimately, however, his wily wrath undoubtedly showed through his outer cloak of courtesy. No child had been born in Herod’s palace. His children were all grown. Yet if there were another King of the Jews, where could he be? This crafty ruler would allow no rival to his throne. In keeping with his diabolical pattern of autocratic authority, any potential menace would certainly be destroyed.

Herod summoned his advisors, and in the ensuing conversation the Magi learned about the Jewish tradition of a Messiah, a great ruler who was to deliver his people from their enemies and restore their former glory. “But where is he to be born?” insisted Herod. “A little town—Bethlehem,” the advisors responded. “For the ancient scripts declare: ‘And thou, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, art by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from thee shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.’”

After dismissing his religious leaders, Herod turned to the Magi. Arduously disguising his blighting scorn, he directed them to Bethlehem, a few miles to the south: “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.”

Look into Herod’s guarded eyes! Is he trustworthy?

Had the Magi only known! Here before them stood a tyrannical king, through whose cold veins coursed vile, regal blood, passed down from Antipas—his grandfather—to Antipater—his father—and then to Herod. Antipas and Antipater laid the foundation of a “dynasty of rulers who in various capacities had ruled all or parts of Palestine and neighboring regions since 55 B.C.”

Had they only known! Here before them writhed the rightful King of the Jews—though not Jewish himself—a king set on his throne by Caesar Augustus in 40 B.C., Herod the Great who had reigned nearly forty years before this bad blood encounter with the Magi from the East.

Had they only known! Here before them snarled a Roman-appointed King of the Jews who, for political purposes, had consummated ten marriages. Most of his wives he had either sent away or divorced. The one he loved most passionately—the Hasmonaean Princess Mariamne I—hated him with profound ferocity, until he silenced her protests with her execution in 29 B.C.

Had they only known! Here before them stood a king—every inch a tyrant given over to inveterate temperamental flare-ups—who had murdered not only his beloved wife Mariamne but also her grandfather Hyrcanus II, as well as her brother Aristobulus. Only three years before his interview with the Magi—Herod had murdered his very own sons: Aristobulus and Antipater.

Had they only known, the Magi could have easily read the King’s cunning behind his directive: “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.”

How close indeed is the resemblance of one tyrant to another! — from a Herod to a Richard III to a Stalin to a Hitler to a Mao Zedong to a Pol Pot to a Saddam Hussein, all of whom built an “edifice of human destiny”ⁱ on the bruised backs of the blameless, on the shredded lives of the scrupulous, on the senseless slaughter of the innocent.

*What deeds of death to still an hour of fears,
What waste of wealth to gild a moth’s frail wings?
A Caesar to the breeze his banner flings,
An Alexander with his bloody spears,
A Herod heedless of his people’s tears!
And Rome in ruins while Nero laughs and sings:
Ye (all) actors of a drama, cruel and cold. . . ⁱⁱ*

By such perpetrators of cruelty we are forced to recognize that the world exists with absurdities.

The World Exists with Absurdities

In a troubling interchange between the two younger Brothers Karamazov, Ivan relates to his younger brother Alyosha three separate accounts of young children who individually were tormented, tortured, and killed in a senseless, brutal fashion. Cynical and rebellious—and with righteous indignation—Ivan shouts, *I tell you, (brother) novice, absurdities are all too necessary on earth. The world stands on absurdities, and without them perhaps nothing at all would happen.* ⁱⁱⁱ

It was an absurdity that Herod—to preserve his power and authority, his right to rule and his privilege to oppress—should have sent his soldiers to disturb the silent streets of the little town of Bethlehem, resulting in an incomprehensible portrait of an inconceivable horror. An edict by Herod—born out of a furious rage and the conviction that the Magi had tricked him— sent soldiers scurrying into the little town. It wasn’t the women they wanted this time to satisfy their raging lusts. It wasn’t the men they sought this time to conscript into Herod’s ruthless army. It was the children they ferreted out from every corner—male children two years old and younger. Blood flowed in the streets like a river of red mingled with a tidal wave of tears. Soldiers violently wrenched boy babies from their mothers’ arms and

dashed their heads against the rugged rocks, or hoisted them on their razor-sharp rapiers, or ran them through with their glimmering swords, until hundreds of dead children lay about . . . eviscerated! . . . eviscerated like a herd of baby fawns after a massive deer hunt. Reports issued from messengers paralyzed by incredulity, reports punctuated by the incessant wailing lifted into the night throughout the village: deafening lamentations of the empty-armed women, weeping hysterically for their children, refusing to be consoled . . . because they were no more. The slaughter of the innocents.

The world stands on absurdities, declares Ivan Karamazov.

It is an absurdity that the Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda abducts children five to nine years old, brainwashes them, and then trains them to kill other children and their families, another slaughter of the innocents, and *a voice is heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachael weeping for her children; she refuses to be consoled, because they are no more* . . . in Uganda.

The world stands on absurdities, declares Ivan Karamazov.

It is an absurdity that the cries of children go essentially unheeded in Darfur, where entire villages have been wiped out and 400,000 people have been killed since February 2003 due to persistent and heinous fighting among rebel groups, security forces and the janjaweed militia. Among the 3.6 million people affected to date, 1.8 million children under the age of 18 are decimated by devastating hunger, ravaging disease, widespread displacement, all-encompassing fear, and violent death. . . another slaughter of the innocents, and *a voice is heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachael weeping for her children; she refuses to be consoled, because they are no more* in Darfur.

The world stands on absurdities, declares Ivan Karamazov.

It is an absurdity that the cries of abused children in the United States are muffled in complicity. Nearly 1500 children die each year due to child abuse or neglect. More than 80 percent of children who die from abuse are younger than 4 years old. . . another slaughter of the innocents, and *a voice is heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachael weeping for her children; she refuses to be consoled, because they are no more*.

The Winter of Our Discontent

Now is the winter of our discontent Made glorious summer by this sun of York . . . announces Shakespeare's Richard III. Few usurpers have measured up to the enormity of King Richard's tyranny. Were we to speak of our own restlessness these days, I suppose we would contend that *the winter of our discontent* appears to be lodged primarily in the external threats inherent, implicit, and explicit in the global world scene. After all, there never was a war to end all wars, only wars that perpetuate more war.

Without dwelling further on the obscene, let us hasten to the reassurance of the great Mahatma Gandhi, who apparently experienced numerous *winters of discontent* in his endless efforts to enunciate non-violent terms for world peace:

When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers and for a time they seem invincible but in the end they always fall—think of it. Always.

Far be it from me to reshape Shakespeare or enhance Gandhi; but according to our faith, we could say, *now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this Son of God*, born a vulnerable child into the reign of King Herod, as chaotic and cruel an era as any we could attempt to describe. We find infinite comfort and hope not only in the historical record that tyrants ultimately fall but also in the biblical account that the Son of God, the Child of Bethlehem, ultimately rises as preeminent in God's scheme of redemption and reign of peace accomplished through unconditional love.

Redemptive Regal Blood

Carlo Menotti's inquisitive Amahl asked one of the Night Visitors, "Are you a real king? . . . Do you have regal blood?" to which King Bathazar responded, "Yes." "Can I see it?" asked Amahl. King Balthazar graciously declines by rejoining, "It's just like yours."

The child of Bethlehem comes as Savior of the world and King of the universe with blood that is just like ours, the essence of God's incarnate love. In that Bethlehem barn the most mysterious and extraordinary divine dynamic occurred: the three Magi found the authentic King of the Jews, the Prince of Peace, who has regal blood that is just like ours. In that Bethlehem barn, heaven and earth, the divine and the human, became embodied in this manifest infant life, in a manger where

The silver of one star in a brilliantly lighted heaven

Plays cross-lights against the pine green^{iv} . . . of all this

unintelligible world.^v

The world stands on absurdities, insisted Ivan Karamazov, *and without them perhaps nothing at all would happen*. He goes on to claim: *We know what we know*.

What do you know? inquired Alyosha.

I know that *I don't understand anything*.^{vi}

The Sphinx-like riddle of *man's inhumanity to man*^{vii} persists to this very day, even as it has throughout the centuries, and we are forced to admit—even in light of all of our brilliance and advancement—that we simply do not understand the meaning in human suffering. While the Sphinx-like riddle remains, so does the Christ who abides with us still, the answer to the world's yearning, the pardon for the world's sins, the promise written across the deaths of the innocents, the assurance of new life in Christ's eternal realm. He awaits only the venture of our faith to prove himself the answer to the mystery.^{viii}

Conclusion: Ring in the Christ

As we stand expectantly on the threshold of the New Year, we acknowledge once again the ineffable mystery of life. We acknowledge as well that our faith looks to the Christ to carry us confidently into the unknown future while living with the burning questions and the unanswered riddles.

*Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.*

*Ring out the grief that saps the mind,
For those that here we see no more;
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind.*

*Ring out false pride in place and blood,
The civic slander and the spite;
Ring in the love of truth and right,
Ring in the common love of good.*

*Ring in the valiant man (one) and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be.^{ix}*

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Notes

ⁱ Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), *The Brothers Karamazov*, Part II, Book Five, Chapter 4, (Everyman's Library, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1990) p. 246

ⁱⁱ John Richard Moreland (1880-1947), *Kings*, lines 4-9

ⁱⁱⁱ Op. cit., Dostoyevsky, p. 243

^{iv} From the first two lines of Carl Sandburg's poem *Star Silver*:

The silver of one star

Plays cross-lights against pine green (stanza 1)

^v From William Wordsworth's poem *Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, lines 39-43

*In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world
Is lightened . . .*

^{vi} Op. cit., Dostoyevsky, p. 243

^{vii} From Robert Burns' poem *Man Was Made to Mourn* (1786):

*Man's inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn.* (stanza 7)

^{viii} Adapted from George A. Buttrick, Exposition of *Matthew*, The Interpreter's Bible, Volume 7, p. 260

^{ix} Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892), *Ring Out, Wild Bells*, stanzas 2, 3, 6, 9