

Communion Meditation: Running From or Running Towards?
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Matthew 2:13-23

Happy New Year, everyone! There's something so fresh and hopeful about turning the page on an old year and launching into a new one, isn't there? One of the ways we welcome a new year is by thinking about what has occurred over the past twelve months. And wouldn't you know it, Google has an app for that!

Last Wednesday, if you were to go to the online search engine and click on the graphic at the top of the page, it would give you the top five online search topics in 2014 – by country. Isn't that the coolest? So I did a little research...

In Mexico, Mundial 2014 (the World Cup), Robin Williams, iPhone 6, Ebola and Jennifer Laurence were the top searches.

The United Kingdom was not very different, with World Cup 2014, iPhone6, Peaches Geldolf, Robin Williams and Rik Mayall as the top searches.

In the United States, it was Robin Williams, World Cup, Ebola, Malaysia Airlines and Flappy Bird as the top contenders. Someone tell me what the heck a flappy bird is at coffee hour, I'm pretty sure it's one of those addictive online games that I steer clear from.

This got me wondering... what do you imagine the top five Google searches would have been at Jesus' birth....if there was Google back then, of course?! What would have been "Trending"? Which websites would have garnered the most hits?

Perhaps it would have been a MapQuest search: Fastest Road to Judea

Or a Travelocity page: Accommodations in Bethlehem

Or maybe a government site: How to register for the Census online?

More than likely, King Herod would have topped the list.

He's definitely the bad guy in today's scripture reading. Here we are at the end of our Christmas revelry, still celebrating the holiness of incarnation, and this talk of violence is pretty hard to stomach.

Like most villains, King Herod was a complicated person. Being half Jewish and half Gentile, he probably had something of an identity issue. To those he favored he could be quite generous. About ten years into his reign there was a large famine, so Herod melted down some gold plates from his personal treasury and paid for food so the Jewish people would not starve.

Usually, he was known for being a murderous king, with an insane jealous streak. He was called "Great" because he consolidated a very large empire; unfortunately he did it in a very cruel way. As soon as he was appointed by Caesar Augustus in 37 B.C., Herod assassinated the Jewish Supreme Court known as the Sanhedrin. Then, he took three hundred more leaders out of Jerusalem and executed them.

His jealousy of those he perceived to have power did not stop with the aristocracy. He was married to ten women, who had a total of fifteen children and among them ten sons. As his ten sons grew older and became men, they were destined to become rulers. King Herod knew this, and lived in fear of his sons overthrowing him, so he would regularly accuse them of treason and assassinate them. Caesar Augustus said this of Herod (and I quote): "It is a safer to be a pig in a farmer's household than to be a son in Herod's court."

He was also called Herod the Great because he was a builder. One of his most magnificent projects was the Jewish temple that towered seventy feet high, a skyscraper of that day and age. When Jesus got older and cleared out all those money-changers from the Temple, he was in the courtyard of a building that King Herod the Great had built.

Perhaps this can help us understand the depth of Herod's depravity. On the day he died, Herod arranged for a large number of people to be rounded up in Jerusalem and executed. He did this because he knew that there would not be any mourners for him, so he arranged numerous other opportunities for residents of the city to grieve.

So when we hear the story of the wise men coming to him, asking about a potential new ruler born near Jerusalem, now you know the depth of evil behind his reaction. When Herod asked, "Where is this child king to be born?" and the wise men answered "In Bethlehem", Herod thought.. "We will take care of that." And he sent his soldiers into Bethlehem to take care of it.

Now, most of our Christmas pageants end right at that moment. No one includes the scene of what happened next, because it is too violent and destructive and we don't want to go there. We are all too familiar with the issues of violence against our most vulnerable children, thank you very much.

And if we do choose to engage the story, we may be tempted to explain it away by saying that good came out of bad, and that somehow this series of events was needed to ultimately fulfill God's plan. Or we might point to this destruction as an unintended consequence of God's creative interventions, there is always collateral damage.

What we might agree on together is that God grieves over the loss of any of child, and agonizes over the activities and actions of people, to whom have been given liberty of thought and freedom to act. And we might also admit to ourselves that instead of taking place in a pristine, sterile, and unrealistic backdrop, Jesus' life, beginning with his birth story, took place within a background of despicable suffering, and still (somehow), is good news.

It reminds us that God's love comes to humanity, not within the setting of a fairy tale with a "happy ever after" ending, but in the midst of real human suffering.

Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt and once they were told the way was safe, travelled back to Judea and settled in Nazareth.

We can accept that for them, the decision was all about flight. Facing the dangers and threats posed by Herod's insecurity, they fled in an attempt to keep safe. They ran away and found sanctuary in Egypt.

But we can also view their actions as less reactive and more proactive. For Joseph and Mary, it was time to get up and go. Yes, they ran away from an

immediate physical threat, but they were also running straight towards God and what God had in store for them, and for his Son.

By telling us that Mary and Joseph faithfully trusted the 'Angels of the Lord' and did what they were told, Matthew reveals a proactive and faithful response from the family entrusted with the care and nurture of God's Son.

This family moved away from the violence of Herod and by doing so moved towards the destiny of a child who would become Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, Messiah, in due course.

But what does it mean for us today?

If this doesn't sound like you, then maybe it's a friend or a loved one that come to mind. Every one of us has a past. For some of us, the past is full of problems and mistakes for which we have built up a tremendous amount of guilt. We carry regret like a boulder on our shoulders, unsure whether or not we can trust each other enough to put it down. Holding onto past mistakes can make us feel stuck. It is then we are more like Herod than we would care to admit, making our decisions from a place of fear, which is one way of doing violence against ourselves or those we love.

At the dawn of this New Year, this new beginning, are we running away from something in our past, or are we running towards a new future? Do we say to ourselves, 'let's hope this year is better than the last', or do we say 'let's make this year the best we can'? If we search our hearts, how we get there will be different for each of us. Like Mary and Joseph, we too can move in the direction of God, prepared to trust and see where the journey will take us. May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.