

The Hinge

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December 30, 2007

Matthew 2: 13-23
Isaiah 67

Not long ago, I got into a hospital elevator. A young woman, another visitor, followed. I pushed the button for the fifth floor, she for the third. There was a moment of stillness. And then, almost simultaneously, impatiently, just about when the first two seconds of the interminable three-second wait had passed, we both reached for the “close door” button. I don’t know if any of you ever make use of that button, but I suspect that it’s not really meant to speed up the process of the elevator door closing. I think it’s there more as backup if there’s a problem. But time, after all, was fleeing. And we were hurrying ahead.

But this, today, is the brink of January, when the ancient god Janus, whose two faces look both back and forward, becomes a companion. For those of us who are so often racing forward along the line of time, the moment is an invitation to pause. Perhaps to consider ways in which the past, the current moment and the future each shape and drive us. And the biblical story adds its own impetus.

It’s a little odd, isn’t it, that the lectionary gets ahead of itself this Sunday? We’ve just had Christmas. Next week, with Epiphany, the magi arrive. The beginning of chapter two in Matthew. But today the readings jump out of chronological order. This morning, the magi have already come and gone back another way, Herod has struck viciously, and we’re en route to Egypt, fleeing with Mary and Joseph, having skipped the start of chapter two and jumped into its finish.

Here we stand on the threshold between the year past and the new year, between the birth in Bethlehem and what it will mean anew in our lives. And here at this hinge point, time gets out of whack. The line bends. The future intrudes on the present.

It’s a little disconcerting. Lines are good, or at least cycles ... I was always a fan of the Joni Mitchell song “The Circle Game.” Some of you know it.

*And the seasons they go round and round
And the painted ponies go up and down
Were captive on the carousel of time
We can’t return we can only look behind
From where we came
And go round and round and round
In the circle game ...*

But today's text urges us to understand time differently. Here a radically disruptive event is set in front of everything else. Power strikes out against the innocent, Jesus and his family become refugees, and God goes with them. For all of us in the middle of the 12 days of Christmas, it's a signal. Something has changed in the world since last Monday night's carols and candles, and, as one commentator (William Willimon) suggests, getting back to normal life may not be so easy.

The moment is defining for everyone involved. Herod, known for his cold-hearted ambition, described by the historian Josephus as having executed his own wife and two sons because of the threat they posed, strikes out. The magi didn't cooperate. And so, robbed of his duplicitous plan by their refusal to comply, Herod's vicious reach is indiscriminate.

The church calls it the massacre of the holy innocents, but not too many congregations talk about it. So it continues to be across the world. Where power is threatened, preemptive strikes take the lives of the innocent. And many good people try not to think too much about it.

Because of Herod's reaction, and the warning in a dream, Jesus becomes a refugee very early in his life. Joseph takes his family, wanting to protect them as so many parents have wanted to do in our own time, and flees. The description in the gospel is brief, curt, without embellishment, but the journey can't have been so simple. Like the millions of refugees who currently struggle to find food and shelter and safety, the young family must have met great dangers and uncertainties.

Some of you have read Madeline l'Engle's "A Wrinkle in Time." In it, points in time are brought together by something called a tesseract, in which the timeline wrinkles, or folds in on itself. In the book, a kind of time travel results. I think that Matthew may intend us to see this moment in a similar way. The text wants us to recognize how the flight to Egypt is part of a much larger story of God's accompaniment and protection. Like Janus, it looks both forward and back. Points in time, past and future, are linked with this one – the ancient history of Joseph and his family, the Exodus, the experience of the people of Israel in exile, and in the future, perhaps, the cross. All moments when, despite the worst seeming to be happening, God's providence surrounds the vulnerable and suffering, leading them to new life.

As an aside, it's fascinating that the apocryphal literature tries to fill in details about what happened to Jesus and his parents en route to Egypt. There are great legends about that journey, and how the earth and its creatures help the family along the way. My favorite is the one in which Joseph and Mary and Jesus take shelter in a cave for the night. While they sleep, a spider, wanting to protect the baby from the cold, spins a web across the cave's entrance.

Sometime in the night, Herod's soldiers, searching for the escaped quarry, approach the cave. But, noticing the unbroken web, they decide that nobody could be inside, and they continue on their way. Thus even the smallest of creatures plays a role in God's purposes.

Back, though, to the story Matthew gives us. And to how it disrupts not only Herod and the family of Jesus, but all of us. It's a reality shot after all the food and presents, just as we're getting to taking down the tree and making ready to return to routine. Look back, Matthew says, and look forward. This moment, and all the ones it's linked to, help define the people of God. We're those who don't fully live in linear time. Nor do we just ride the carousel that cycles around and around. Instead, we're those who are marked by the interruption of a God whose providence prevails even against such as Herod, against, in the end, the powers of death.

Maybe you know it on a deep personal level, where your own vulnerability or suffering has been touched by divine presence and purpose that leads you forward. Or maybe you sense it in the invitation to stand with those who are now refugees, and to be part of the movement that offers protection and shelter to the innocent victims of powerful forces.

There are wrinkles in this line of time that bring the ending right into the present, and may change what we are and choose. Today, on the hinge as the year turns, we're invited to think deeply about how the larger story shapes us. And to give thanks for the purposes of God which will always be stronger than those of Herod.