

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
8:00 a.m. and 11.15 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Second Sunday after Christmas Day – January 5 2020

“Theodicy”*

Scripture: Matthew 2:13-23; 2 Christmas A

So why isn't God born into the world with an impermeable barrier of divine protection? Why allow for the birth of a savior, and then send the child and his overburdened, overwhelmed parents on a terrible flight for their lives into a foreign land to escape the grasp of an undeniably wicked and cruel tyrant, rather than simply overwhelm that tyrant with God's own omnipotent power? If Herod is a threat to Jesus, why is it that Jesus, the son of God, has to run? Why doesn't God just take out Herod in a clandestine deadly strike, or why doesn't God banish Herod to a foreign land instead of Jesus? Or why not drop a few well-placed threats? *“Just try to lay your hands on this child, Herod, and see what happens to you.”* Why doesn't God intervene to stop this madness?

Well, I think perhaps God has already intervened in the most potent and powerful way possible, even for a God we call “Almighty.” Over the generations, I believe so many of us have been taught, so many have assumed, that the omnipotence

* “Theodicy” refers to that part of theological discourse concerning the defense of, or reasoning supporting, the goodness of God in light of the existence of great suffering and the presence of evil in the world.

of God, the power of God, is a power to overwhelm, to manipulate, to coerce, to conquer, to choose those to bless and those to curse. And people want to believe, perhaps need to believe, that the power of God transcends the realities of our weaknesses and frailties. Yet I cannot turn away from the fact, that despite all the tales of God's otherworldly powers, all the stories of miraculous victories in battle or food from heaven or plagues upon God's enemies or the majestic pronouncements of prophets, that, when all was said and done, when the time had come for God to intervene in the most present, most meaningful, most powerful way possible, the way in which God comes among us is in the utterly helpless, dependent, loving, innocent way that each and every one of us comes into this world. God is known first not in the guise of a king or a lord or a warrior, but in the most simple and profound expression of the meekness, gentleness, neediness, vulnerability, and undeniable potential, of human life. God intervenes as... a baby. And immediately the powers of sin will not leave him in peace. His parents run ...and hope beyond hope that they can hide just long enough for their child to survive. And it seems to be in very human circumstances, in very human expressions like love, care, sacrifice, and hopefulness, that the undeniable power of God is revealed in a world filled with trouble.

Why is it so? Why is the world, created "good" our faith would tell us, capable of so much bad? Well, I don't know the answer. But perhaps a glimmer of meaning

lies somewhere in the very nature of our being. The fact is... these bodies of ours, risen up and made from the same elements of the universe around us, are simply not able to withstand more than a little of the forces which the power of this universe can unleash. We are finite, living in a place where so many things are so much larger and stronger than us. Yet life isn't fulfilled by wallowing in insecurity or remorse or fear. We human beings have the capacity, the power, to make profound impact upon the world around us... for better and for worse. But we are not invulnerable, we are not the masters of our universe, so in turn we want a god who is, and many want a god that would use its power to satisfy their every need and secure them from every harm. But Matthew reminds us today that such is not the God we have come to know as followers of Jesus Christ. There must be some power more potent, more meaningful, more true to the nature of our creation than the power that would simply do our bidding. Matthew says God enters the world in humility and vulnerability, and very much in need of... love.

I have seen and heard of more evil and suffering in my short lifetime than ever I would have hoped or expected. And yet I have experienced but a tiny fraction of the suffering and sorrow of my human family and of a world torn by forces of hatred and greed. Just this past week has seen the celebration of God with us, and also the devastation we wreak upon one another through engines of war. We have recalled the

birth of the Messiah... and witnessed the suffering of disease, homelessness, or natural disaster.

I do not know why it is this way. But I do know this: As followers of Jesus, we are not entirely powerless in times like these. We have been given a most potent power for good. In Jesus, we have come to know something of a God who comes into a world in which hope still lives and love still inspires. We have seen God enter the world in the babe of Bethlehem and give himself into the hands of others to care for him in times of good and times of evil. And how that child came to know times of evil. Yet even now we live to say that evil did not prevail.

We can wrestle without end with the questions of the existence of suffering and evil when we make ourselves, *our* fears and *our* desires, the center of *our* existence. Or we can act as church, serving as a community in which hope is nurtured and natural, where care is shared, and the terrible burdens of suffering are borne together with the collective hopes and prayers and actions of a faithful people dwelling with a God who sustains the world and calls us to fulfill a good purpose in whatever circumstances we exist. Perhaps when we confront the suffering, the suffering of others and of ourselves, we can learn to live more respectfully before the awesome power of life that God has unleashed into being. Perhaps, from time to time, we can

take the hand of the person next to us and let them know of our presence for them and seek their presence for us.* That is something Jesus did.

This work does not promise to insulate us from the hatred of Herod or the powers that be in our times. It doesn't mean people have no reason, at times, to fly from the face of disaster in a search for safety or a better life. It does not mean that joy will not be challenged and hardship will not be known. It means, I hope, that we will learn to be so trusting as a certain baby born so long ago in Bethlehem, so faithful as a certain young man who told others of God's love for them and for this Creation, so persevering as a certain adult who held to his faith even in the face of his own demise, and so hopeful as a certain Savior who calls us even now to do the same.

Trusting, faithful, persevering, and hopeful. Like the one born in a manger on the first Christmas morn.

* This line of thinking is influenced by the work of Stanley Hauerwas, principally in his work entitled God, Medicine, and Suffering (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), p. 51 ff.