

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
305 EAST MAIN STREET  
DURHAM, NC 27701  
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



## **“Returning to ‘Reality’”**

**A sermon by Mark E. Diehl**

**Second Sunday after Christmas (Year A)**

**January 5, 2014**

**Ephesians 1:3–12; Psalm 147:12–20; Matthew 2:1–18**

---

I can feel the season of Christmas slipping away. Can you? The garland is drying out; spent Christmas trees are at the curb for trash pick-up. In the stores, the only sign of Christmas is 70% off, and valentines are in the seasonal aisle! School begins anew, the routine returns, and some of us experience either a letdown or perhaps some relief.

A new year has begun, bringing with it new possibilities and hopes. Budgets are concluded and tallied for the old year and new ones are implemented, hopefully with greater accuracy and realism and a commitment to stay within their bounds! Resolutions may have been made for how we might be, how we might act, what we might do in the new year.

I want Christmas to linger, at least a bit longer. The all too brief glimpses of hopefulness of the season past we wish to sustain. However, the reality is that seasonal truces and cessation of hostilities between warring factions—between husbands and wives, parents and children, bosses and employees—these truces don’t hold for long.

A previous church where I served had an annual mission trip to Jamaica. It departed the first or second day of January. By the end of December, we were already packing our gear. I always felt that the season of Christmas was truncated by the mission trip.

We carried heavy bags through crowded airports; armed soldiers manned checkpoints in Montego Bay; we boarded a rickety bus and rode four hours on

narrow mountain byways, disembarking in an impoverished neighborhood. Unloading our bags in the dusty road, all thoughts of Christmas trees and the baby Jesus and parties *were gone*. Not only were we out of the Christmas season, we were out of everything that was normal and routine for us. Even though we were out of *our* reality, we were squarely in someone else's reality.

The truth is that we need not travel to a third world country to enter such alternate realities. Two million people in North Carolina are classified by the federal government as "hungry." One in four children in NC can be categorized as poor, and if they are children of color, the rate goes above 40%. While some parts of Durham experience a renaissance, other neighborhoods have an 80% child poverty rate. (Statistics taken from Dec. 28, 2013 *News & Observer* article by Gene Nichol, "From Silence to Savagery, Pain for the Poor Intensifies")

I have had the great privilege of seeing a grandchild born and holding a new life in my hands. She is beautiful, she is warm, she is well fed and safely housed. How is it that four in ten children of color do not have the same opportunity? What have they done differently than what my grandchild has done? Nothing, other than to be born in different circumstances.

A great challenge that exists is for ordinary folks like you and me to see the critical issues. The problem is not that we experience loss as Christmas slips away, or that commercial interests move quickly to the next money-making holiday. That is not a crisis. Our challenge is to see, to acknowledge, and enter in to the realities that exist 365 days a year for an invisible and significant part of the world, people who are our neighbors.

What does it mean in our January days that Christmas was celebrated in December, that Christ was born, that God became flesh and dwelt among us? Are our lives somehow changed by that Good News of Emmanuel—God with us? In the mix of realism and resolution, faith needs to speak to us.

The Gospel of Luke provides us with the details of Jesus' birth. Matthew, however, provides a succinct version with no details of the birth itself. Instead, the Gospel of Matthew focuses more on the aftermath of the birth of Jesus. The entire second chapter of this Gospel speaks of this aftermath, and its description is given in political and geographic and international language, not in the language of pious faith.

If ever there is an abrupt end to the sweet stories of Christmas and the baby Jesus, it is here. From the manger scene and angel choirs and shepherds, the story thrusts us into a midnight escape from death, the slaughter of hundreds of innocents, and the holy family as refugees in a foreign country.

It is hard to imagine that a baby's birth could set in motion such hatred and destruction. Yet we should not be surprised. We see it on a daily basis in the media. Any time a challenge is perceived by kings and rulers and the powerful, the threat must be eliminated.

Jesus not only was born to address such a world with redemption, his incarnation was participation in the very paradoxes of our reality. Love stirs hate; truth incites lies; worship ignites destruction and persecution.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the Christmas season doesn't linger long after the birth either. It plunges into the very stuff of life and faith, where sentimentality cannot ultimately be sustained because it is crushed by reality.

What sustains faith and life, the story of Matthew tells us, is the promise and power of God. There are tyrants who ruthlessly rule, who have remarkable means to accomplish their ends, whose reach seems unstoppable. Yet a vulnerable baby is protected, an unsophisticated family escapes a trap, the king who would kill ultimately dies, and God's plan for the one who has been born king of the Jews remains.

Herod still exists today, and he indeed is powerful. However, the trust of the church is that the promises and power of God—over against kings and their plans and traps, even over against death itself—will not be frustrated.

That is the buoyant chord struck by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. Speaking of the remarkable blessings that have come to those in Christ, Paul asserts that God's plan for all time was demonstrated and accomplished in Jesus Christ, and that God's people should live according to that plan with great confidence. Paul exhorts Christians to live according to God's reality. It is a reality that understands the existence of Herod, but remains confident in the One who rules over all.

One writer (Juan Luis Segundo) suggests that the church has such an unconvincing Gospel because of our fear and insecurity. He says we worry about ourselves, about others, and about the truth of the gospel because we scarcely view our life

according to the promises found in Ephesians 1. The result is a gospel proclamation that is toned down, safe, and reasonable. But such a faith, such a proclamation is incongruent with the very words of Scripture.

God through Scripture invites us to entertain unreasonable thoughts, to perceive a different reality than what our eyes can see and what our hands can touch. We are invited to trust in God and God's promises that are strong and will prevail, even if we don't know how.

Paul speaks of this new reality where God has begun to move in this world, dismantling its ways and providing hope. Light has dawned and our imaginations can begin to open. The grip of all the old ways and fears begins to loosen. The promise is being kept. A child has been born. The light has shone. We are already new children of God.

At times we wonder if folks like us can make any difference in this world. By the promise and power of God, we can. If you believe you are too small, too insignificant to make any difference; if you question your ability to have an impact or to be effective, I want to encourage you. As someone has said, a mosquito is a small and insignificant creature, but it demands great attention and energy from us when it is buzzing around our heads at night in bed. The infant Jesus was small and vulnerable with the power of a tyrant against him. Because of God's promise and power, salvation to the world has come.

Dr. Howard Thurman writes:

When the song of the angel is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christ's coming begins.

To find the lost  
To heal the broken  
To feed the hungry  
To release the prisoner  
To rebuild the nations  
To bring peace among all  
To make music in the heart.

So in this new year, opportunities exist to engage these promises and power of God given us in Jesus Christ. Some of those opportunities may include reminding ourselves and reminding our leaders of the great disparities and crying needs of the most invisible among us. You and I may need to risk speaking in such a way that city and state leaders address the realities at our doorstep.

Some of those opportunities may be using what we believe are insignificant talents for others: mending broken relationships, speaking words of welcome, showing care and concern, reading to kids who need tutors, visiting the lonely, calling or writing someone who is suffering, engaging mission across the town or around the world, giving more because we already have enough.

Our scripture reminds us that God in Christ entered this world in the middle of crisis, not to avoid crisis. Our faith reminds us that our call is into this world, not away from it. We can remind ourselves and direct our civic leaders toward recognition the harsh realities of poverty and hunger, and public policies that benefit everyone.

There may be many reasons to think such acts will make no difference, for Herod exists in many realms. But remember: God's promise and power exists for every person, even those most insignificant by worldly standards, just as it did for the child in Bethlehem!