

WHAT IF HEROD SUCCEEDED?

Sermon, December 27, 2020

Texts: Matthew 2:1-18, Hebrews 10:5-10

Preceding the Call to Worship, Hebrews 10:5-10 was read, with this introduction and prayer:

This is a Scripture not usually associated with Christmastime, a Scripture I believe records a snippet of the conversation that must have taken place between God the Son and God the Father, just as the Son was about to leave the Father to step across the stars, into Bethlehem and into our lives. "Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am -- it is written about me in the scroll -- I have come to do your will, O God.'" First he said, "Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them" (although the law required them to be made). Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Let us pray: "Gracious God, remind us again this Christmas that Your Son, our Lord, willingly and knowingly entered this world as a baby in order to give us Himself. Remind us that those baby-soft little hands, fashioned by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb, were specifically made so that nails might be driven through them. Remind us that those baby feet, pink and unable to walk, were created so that one day they would walk up a dusty hill to be nailed to a cross. That the sweet infant's head with sparkling eyes and the tiny button nose was so formed in order that one day men might force a crown of thorns onto it. Remind us that the tender baby body, warm and soft, wrapped in swaddling cloths, would one day be ripped open by a spear. Thank you that Jesus came to offer Himself, as the only Sacrifice that would suffice, thus making it possible for us to be holy and acceptable in Your sight, Amen."

I attended a teacher's workshop some years ago in my role on the Board of Trustees at the West Bay Christian Academy. The speaker was saying, "Christian education is not just a qualified teacher who is a committed Christian teaching subject matter with professional methods and accurate content. Christian education is also an atmosphere, an atmosphere that is conducive to learning, nurture, inspiration and growth." He continued, "A student with a scornful or mocking attitude can affect that atmosphere. He can affect an entire class, an entire grade, an entire school and a teacher's spirit and attitude just by being ... **absent.**"

We all laughed at that twist at the end, as all were expecting the speaker to say "... just by being **present.**" But everyone there, and especially the classroom teachers, knew what a difference it makes when that difficult kid *isn't* there. Everyone breathes easier! When the scornful, mocking, disdainful, cynical person isn't there, the overall atmosphere is so much lighter, free-er, happier, positive and more conducive to growth and learning. What a difference the absence of just one person can make, for good or ill. What a difference.

What a difference one can make by just being absent is so wonderfully portrayed in that Christmas film classic "**It's a Wonderful Life,**" which my daughter and I enjoyed watching again on Christmas Day. "I want to live again! I want to live again!" George Bailey cried as he stood on a snow-covered iron bridge, the dark swirling river below. Anyone who has watched this classic knows that with help from Angel Second Class Clarence Oddbody, George had just discovered, to his horror, what life would be like had he never been born, had he never showed up, had he been absent from the activity and life and everyday occurrences of the Bedford Falls community. Bedford Falls had become Pottersville. Its bucolic main street had become a red-light district with loud music and garish, flesh-peddling neon signs. The scene looked like a transformation from Currier and Ives to Sodom and Gomorrah. And it was all because George had never been born.

One person can make an **enormous** difference in the lives of others ... in a community, in an entire culture, even in an entire world. One of the inevitable long-term effects of the pandemic that will last far longer than the disease itself is how many things did not happen, how many memories were not made, how many positive activities for the wellbeing of others did not take place due to the safety restrictions and shutdowns of quarantine? For good or for ill, the consequences of our absences from life will carry on far longer than any of us might imagine.

What if Jesus had never been born? What if Jesus chose to stay isolated in His safe heavenly home above and not venture out into this world of tumult, darkness and difficulty? Or, what if Herod had been successful in killing Jesus in the cradle, as he attempted to do in our reading this morning? What difference would it have made in history or in our daily lives if Jesus had never lived in this world? A **great** difference! ¹

Jesus, the greatest man who ever lived, has affected and changed virtually every aspect of our lives, and many people just aren't consciously aware of it. So much of what we take for granted finds its roots in the historical fact that Jesus Christ entered this world; so much of what we take for granted in basic civility finds its roots in Jesus Christ and His teachings and the influence of His followers. While the church may have strayed badly at times from Christ's teaching over the centuries, the overwhelming impact of Christ and His church on earth has been for good. In the limited time we have on this first Sunday after Christmas, I'd like to cite just five quick examples:

¹ Much content was gleaned from *What if Jesus Had Never Been Born*, by D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, Thomas House Publishers, c. 2001

1. **THE VALUE OF LIFE.** In classical Rome and Greece, it was dangerous to conceive a baby. Not only were medical standards far below that of today, abandonment of infants was commonplace. Infirm or unwanted babies were often taken out into the forest or the mountainside and left to be consumed by wild animals, or to starve, or for others to pick them up for their own perverted ends ...people who would raise these abandoned children for slavery, prostitution or gladiatorial contests. Female babies in particular were most frequently abandoned.
Then Jesus came. He humbled himself to be born as a vulnerable baby. Since that time, and because of Jesus' care and attention for the poor and the infirm, Christians have historically cherished life as sacred, Christians have historically held that **ALL** lives matter. In ancient Rome, Christians saved many abandoned babies and brought them up in the faith. Other believers started founding homes, orphanages and nurseries. These new practices, based on this higher view of life, created a foundation for Western civilization's ethic of the value of human life.
2. **THE ELEVATION OF WOMEN.** Women, too, have benefited immensely from Jesus' influence. In ancient cultures, the wife was the property of her husband. In India, China, Rome and Greece, men believed women were not able or competent to be independent. Prior to Christian influences in India, widows were voluntarily or involuntarily burned on their husbands' funeral pyres. These centuries-old practices of India ended in the early 19th century through missionary intervention with the British authorities. Charles Spurgeon told the story of a Hindu woman who said to a missionary: *"Surely your Bible was written by a woman."* The missionary asked her why she said that. She replied, *"Because it says so many kind things for women. Our pandits never refer to us but in reproach."* It's sadly ironic how so many today believe Christianity has oppressed women (*more than ironic; it's ignorant of the historical facts*). Christianity has elevated women enormously. As someone expressed it, had Jesus never come, the iconic Gloria Steinem may not have survived infancy!
3. **THE STRENGTHENING OF THE FAMILY.** As Christians grew in number, they introduced cohesive family values to a world riddled with sexual immorality. In A.D. 125, Aristides, an Athenian philosopher, wrote a defense of the Christian faith to Emperor Hadrian. Regarding sexual matters he wrote: *"They do not commit adultery or immorality ... Their wives, O king, are as pure as virgins, and their daughters are modest. Their men abstain from all unlawful sexual contact and from impurity, in the hopes of recompense that is to come in another world."* Christianity has helped establish and preserve the family as the basic cohesive unit of society.
4. **THE ADVANCES OF SCIENCE.** Science, too, can be said to be a direct consequence of Christianity. Our gadget-filled, comfortable existence would not be possible except for Christ. American physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer stressed that modern science was born out of the Christian worldview. Mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said that Christianity gave birth to science because of *"the medieval insistence on the rationality of God."* Some of the greatest pioneers of science were Christians. Johannes Kepler, near the turn of the 17th century, asserted that the study of science and nature is simply *"thinking God's thoughts after Him."* Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), whose innovations in mathematics and probability science helped pave the way for the computer, was also a devout and vocal Christian. And Isaac Newton wrote, *"This most beautiful system of the sun, planets, and comets could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being."*
5. **EDUCATION FOR ALL.** Finally, education for the masses has its origin in Christianity, and especially Protestant Christianity. The roots of education for the masses go back to the Reformation - especially to the father of Presbyterianism, John Calvin. The Reformers believed that the only way the Protestant Reformation would take hold would be if lay people could read the Bible for themselves. So, in order to read their Bibles, the people needed to know how to read! The greatest universities were started by Christians for Christian purposes. I haven't seen this myself, but I'm told that engraved in stone by the entrance of Harvard are these words: *"After God had carried us safe to New England and we had builded our houses, provided necessaries for our livelihood, rear'd convenient places for God's worship, and settled the civil government: One of the next things we longed for and looked after was to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when our present ministers shall lie in the dust."*

I could go on; I've only skimmed the surface of but five of many areas, each of which could be plunged to much greater depths. Simply put, the presence and message of Jesus brought incalculable benefits to our earthly existence. Had Jesus never left His home, had He stayed isolated from this world, had He never been born or had Herod succeeded, we would have remained in the darkness and tumult of ignorance and sin. He is the Light of the World. His transforming, redeeming power in the lives of countless individuals down through time is really immeasurable. It is the gift of His Presence that is the greatest of all His presents. The salvation secured by the Presence of God Incarnate Who died on our behalf is the greatest gift of all. The benefits of the Christian faith are outweighed by the wonder of what He has done in providing salvation to all who, by grace, place their faith in Him.

What a difference that historical Presence has made. And what a difference we can make when we carry that Presence into our world today ... for good, and for ever.