

Text: Isaiah 63:7-9; Matthew 2: 13-23

Title: " I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord"

Date: December 26

It's the day after Christmas, probably the most ambiguous day of the year. Travis suggested that I read Dave Berry's *The Angel, The Shepherd and Walter the Christmas Miracle dog*. What a hoot, I recommend reading it out loud- anyway, Doug, the central character, comments that Christmas is not his favorite day he much prefers Christmas Eve. Oh he like the presents and all of that, but by the end of the day some are already broken and now he has to wait 365 days for the next Christmas to come around. I suspect that many of us feel that way the day after Christmas. O we still have our family and friends around to celebrate – but 364 days seems so far away....

So it is probably a good thing to remind ourselves that Christmas isn't really about family and friends, Christmas isn't really about the giving and receiving of presents- ultimately Christmas isn't really about the birth of a baby in the manger. Yeah I know- that IS what it is all about, but in a larger view, Christmas day is just the logical extreme in God's self revelation to us as The God Who Saves....

Which is why Isaiah is singing the praises of God. He has just told the Exiles in Babylon that God is going to vindicate them- that God will rejoice over them as a young man rejoices over his bride. (Gee, where have we heard that imagery before?) Isaiah urges them to go through the gates and build up the highway, for your salvation comes. They shall be called the Holy People and in a stunning reversal of the woes proclaimed by Hosea who called them Not Forgiven and Not My People, they shall now be known as Sought Out and A City Not Forsaken. Isaiah wants his people to understand that this is all going to happen NOW and God is the one making this happen- not angels or any other supernatural beings like the pagans worship, but God, their God, because that is just what God does: calls a people to himself and saves them.

Which is what is going in Matthew. We all know the story of the Wise Men from the East, how they followed the Star. Evidently their star charts didn't tell them what kind of guy that Herod was. It would have been nice if they knew that Herod wasn't Jewish, that he was Arab, coming from the area on the Jordanian side of the Dead Sea. Herod's claim to the throne was his marrying someone in the royal family. Actually, his real

talent was in manipulating the Romans and killing everyone he perceived as a threat. He killed his mother, his favorite wife, his sons... the list goes on. So when we hear that Herod ordered the death of every boy under the age of 2 that makes perfect sense to us.

What are we talking about here? Let's see. Bethlehem was a little town, less than 10 miles from Jerusalem. We don't know, but I doubt if the population was anymore than 7- 800, 1000 at the outside. What would be the ratio of the male population under 2- 12- 15 toddlers? We really don't know, but the number is low enough not to make into the history books. It's like condemning Hitler and Stalin for kicking their dogs. In light of their other crimes- that pales into insignificance.

Matthew tells us this story for 2 reasons. 1) There is an all too human tendency to minimize evil. It's like it's so ugly that we can't look it in the face. So we make excuses, look for extenuating circumstances, or just deny that evil does exist- in all of its horror. God came to save us from evil, real honest to god evil. What can be more evil than murdering children? Even now, when we see pictures of poverty or the victims of war and other disasters- it is the images of children that haunt us. Just how evil do you have to be to order the death of toddlers?

The second reason that Matthew relates this story is that he wants his Jewish reader to connect the dots with another child who narrowly escaped death at the hands of a despot; one that could order the death of hundreds of babies because he saw them as a threat to his rule. A Baby that God used to lead his people from Slavery to Freedom; the one whose very name evokes the Covenant. And while Moses itself is not a Hebrew name (it means "drawn out from the reeds") it does indicate divine rescue- in the same way that Jesus' name means deliverer. Matthew wants us to connect with Jesus with Moses and see the connection between the Old Covenant and the New, that they are flip side of the same coin, but that is far down the road in his gospel.

But for now, it's enough to notice that God sends an Angel to rouse Joseph out of bed and to send them packing before the soldiers got there. The soldiers came in from the North, Joseph, Mary and Jesus would have fled to the south towards Hebron and then cut over to the coastal trade routes that linked Persia with Alexandria. This is the quickest way out of Herod's territory and irony of irony given the events of Easter,

they would have traveled on Roman roads and been protected by Roman soldiers. Who says God doesn't have a sense of humor?

Matthew would agree with Isaiah, that God reaches out and claims his people, and invites them into covenant relationship. It seems only fitting that the day after we celebrate the birth of the one who made it all possible, that we celebrate God claiming as his own little Ariadne Olivia. For in Baptism we celebrate God's actions, not our own. God always initiates, and we always respond. So it is with Baptism. In Baptism, God claims us as His own and we affirm our identity as God's covenant people. Baptism is the outward sign and seal of the covenant relationship. Baptism points us to God's grace, for we are as helpless as Ariadne when it comes to trying to earn God's love. Actually, it works the other way round. We don't have to do good to earn God's love; when we finally understand that we have God's love we are empowered to do good in God's name.

I could go on and on about the theology of baptism- but that would just be getting it the way, for there is an aspect of baptism that defies human words to describe. That somehow in Baptism we experience ourselves as God's people, the Ones sought out, the Ones not forsaken, the Ones that God has rescued from evil. We make promises to and for Ariadne ; but more important, we experience the promise, for God's grace extends even to us- all these years past our own baptisms.

I guess, in the end it comes back to Christmas. In Christmas, God came as a child, in order to save his people. In Baptism we celebrate that salvation, and find our experience of God's seeking us out renewed. What a great way to top off Christmas- God bless us every one!

Let us pray....