

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Alive in the Adventure of Jesus: Risky Business
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December 11, 2016

Micah 5:2-5a, Matthew 2:1-18

I want to begin this morning with some tweets. “Our house and are fall to the army. We are trapped under bombs that didn’t stop last night.” “Hello friends, how are you. I am fine. I am getting better without medicine with too much bombing.” “I miss you. Under attack. Nowhere to go, every minute feels like death. Pray for us. Goodbye.” These are tweets from Bana Alabed, a seven-year-old girl trapped with her family in Eastern Aleppo. People have been following her tweets which not only record her daily struggle but show pictures of the horrific damage in her neighborhood. In some ways she is one of the few people inside Aleppo who has managed to personalize the tragedy of that years-old conflict that has killed more than 600,000 men, women and children. I don’t offer you these tweets this morning in an attempt to spoil your pre-Christmas celebrations, but I offer them as a reminder that these would have been the tweets coming out of Bethlehem. “Herod’s forces on their way. No place to hide.” “Infants and young children singled out. Parents weeping.” “Bethlehem will never be the same. Pray for us.”

There are some things in this world that never change...and leaders like Assad and Herod, leaders who will do anything, kill anyone, to maintain power are one of those never changing things. For those of you unfamiliar with Herod, he was the client king of Judea when Jesus was born. He was a client of Rome, who had installed him in power and given him almost unlimited freedom to kill anyone whom he thought threatened him. He killed his own people when they protested. He killed his wife and two of his sons whom he thought might be trying to unseat him. And so in our story this morning, his seeking to destroy the Christ-child, was completely in character for him, even though from the outside, this claim of a savior-king being born in Bethlehem, appeared to be bit of false news. It would have seemed that way because Bethlehem was a tiny, one-blinking-light kind of town. Nothing much to it. Yet Herod could take no chances. He had to kill the children.

This event raises for me one key question, which is, why did Jesus do it? Why did Jesus engage in this risky business of entering into the world as a vulnerable infant, risking all of God’s work in the world? I realize that this language of Jesus choosing to come into the world may seem a bit odd. Normally we think of God sending the son. Yet the Apostle Paul in his letter to the church at Philippi, tells us that Jesus did not count the power of his divinity as something to be greedily grasped and held on to, but instead Jesus willingly gave it up and became one of us. In other words, Jesus could have decided that the risks weren’t worth it. That it was too great a risk to be born as a child, in a small rural town, at a time when someone like Herod would probably seek him out in an effort to destroy him. And yet he didn’t. This is what Jesus chose. So why? The answer I want to offer you this morning is this. That Jesus engaged in the risky business of coming into the world as a vulnerable child in order to engage in the risky business of loving the world such that one day God’s peace might be made real. Let me explain.

This book (the Bible) offers us God's plan for the world. And God's plan for the world was for peace; not merely a lack of war, but true peace. The kind of peace that brings about the Star Trek world we talked about last week. That world in which everyone has enough. In which there is no fear, racism, sexism or homophobia. That world in which every child can reach old age. This was and is the kind of world that the scriptures offer to us as God's end game. We see this in the passage from the prophet Micah, where he echoes the words of almost every other prophet. *"And he (the messiah) shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace."* Can you sense the peacefulness and abundance that this passage offers? It lets us breathe deeply. Yet what I want to offer to you is that this kind of peace can never be created by power alone; the kind of power wielded by Assad and Herod. I say that because we live in the nation with the greatest economy the world has ever seen; with the greatest military the world has ever seen. And yet we are afraid. We have no peace. The only thing that can bring this peace is love.

For you see that if Jesus came into the world like Robo-Cop, or Robo-Messiah, dressed for war to defeat the enemies of God's people, nothing would have changed, except those in charge. Instead Jesus understood that love was the great healer. For it is in love that barriers are broken down. It is in love that forgiveness is found. It is in love that people share their lives with one another. It is in love that many become one. It is in love that peace is found. And this kind of love, that heals, forgives, reconciles and connects is vulnerable love. For that my friends, is what true love is. True love is always vulnerable because it opens itself to the other. It opens itself to being hurt. It opens itself to loss. It opens itself to pain. But only in being open and vulnerable can love be healing and transforming. And it is this kind of vulnerable love that Jesus offered to the world. It was the kind of love that risked Herod's wrath. It was the kind of love that risked being rejected by hometown friends. It was the kind of love that risked being betrayed by his closest friends. It was the kind of love that risked being arrested, tried and crucified. This was the risky business in which Jesus chose to engage; the risky business of coming into the world as a vulnerable child two thousands years ago.

And my friends, this is the same risky business in which Jesus still engages. He still loves us. He loves our children that we baptized this morning. He loves us regardless of who we are and how we act. He risks us forgetting about him and ignoring him. Yet he still loves. He still offers his love to us and to the world, that we might become people who find peace and build peace. My challenge then for you for this week is this, to ask yourselves, how am I engaging in the risky business of loving others, in such a way that I am creating peace in all that I say and do?