

Sermon-January 1, 2023
Psalm 148
Matthew 2:13-23

About a decade ago during seminary, I did a summer long internship at a Trauma 1 hospital in Atlanta. Clinical Pastoral Education is a training program for chaplains that usually takes place at hospitals, nonprofits and nursing homes. In addition to clinical work, a major component of the program is comprehensive personal reflection and spiritual development. Participants examine how their own history and background shows up when they care for patients, families and staff in the midst of trauma, death, and major life decisions. At the beginning of the program, you make a list of professional and spiritual goals. Now, I'm an avid list maker, so task me with setting intentions and I will enthusiastically chart out all of my hopes and dreams. I remember making that list a mile long-it was a 3 month internship, mind you- it involved adding all kinds of spiritual practices to my daily routine, setting aside more time for prayer, books I wanted to read on topics like grief, healing and family systems. Maybe at the beginning of this new year, you feel the same pull I did that summer. When we start something new, even if it's just symbolic, like turning to a new calendar year, the possibilities can seem limitless. It can be really exciting to imagine the ways we want to spend our time, energy and money. It gives

us a chance to think about how we can do life differently, what we'd like to "get right" this next time around, and how we can leave behind what no longer serves us. Like the overeager student that I was, I sat down to discuss my list with my supervisor. His response was immediate: "Meghan, perhaps a good spiritual practice for you is to do less, not more. Take things off your "to do" list, say no sometimes." Keep it simple, in other words. I so wanted to make the most of my internship and to fill it to the brim with experiences and learnings. But when we're dealing with the holy, the sacred, and life in general, it turns out less is more. In her recent book on prayer, Ann Lamott writes, "I don't know much about God and prayer, but I have come to believe that there is something to be said about keeping prayer simple." She suggests that all prayers are variations on just three words: "Help, Thanks, and Wow." Clearly this movement towards simplicity resonates, as we've seen a great resignation from the workforce and this trend of quiet quitting, a movement of self care and boundary setting. We are no longer buying into the idea that more is always better, especially when the costs are so high.

Of course, keeping it simple is hard. Just one week ago, we gathered here to celebrate the birth of Jesus. After patiently waiting during Advent, we reveled in a day to embrace and rest in pure joy. Singing beloved

carols, our children and teenagers telling the familiar story, our smiling faces basking in candlelight as we sang Silent Night. We paused to bask in the goodness and abundance of a God who cares for us so much, that he sent his son to live with us. Watching the story of Jesus' birth come to life with the pageant, and our own children becoming the shepherds, magi, and the holy family, I think we get a glimpse of what that first Christmas was like. Yes, there were age-old prophecies fulfilled, choruses of angels and divine dreams, precious gifts from foreign powers, but the core of what happened is familiar to us all. Under an ordinary sky full of stars, a crying, wiggly, newborn in need of love and nourishment is born, to joyful, tired parents, who are figuring out what it means to keep a baby alive. What a balm for this world. And yet, just a week later, the encroaching threats don't take long to invade our joy, sending Mary and Joseph to Egypt, to save the life of their son. Herod, like Pharaoh before him, is threatened by a child, so he kills all children under the age of two around Bethlehem. Matthew describes the gruesome reality that surrounds Jesus' birth. Herod is so intent on preserving his own power and status, that he is willing to use violence against the most vulnerable. *"A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."* Our passage this morning is chilling,

it's terrifying, and I wish I could say that it's unimaginable. But it's not. Isn't there something all too familiar in that atrocity as well? Unaccompanied minors in cages along the Border; teenagers executed for defending women's rights in Iran; a toddler washed up on the shores of the Mediterranean. If a child can't be safe, how can anyone dream of it? When I was pregnant with my daughter, Inez, I had to go to the Emergency Room around 5 months because I thought I was having a miscarriage. Everything turned out ok, but I remember that terrible realization of my inability to guarantee my child's safety, even when she was still in my womb.

What a way to begin the year, with this passage. What a way for Jesus to begin his life. This text reminds us how critical the need was for Christ's birth. The son of God was born among us, into a world ruled by brokenness and violence. The son of God was born among us **because** this is a world ruled by brokenness and violence. The treatment of children has a way of reflecting truth and clarity that's not always possible when it involves adults. With children, their innocence is not debatable-there is no way to assign them responsibility, no way to say that somehow their actions led to this. They are innocent, without blame. Karoline Lewis, a professor from Luther Seminary writes that "Christmas has a way of holding

innocence and loss together in a kind of tension that the heart feels. When only a week passes between Jesus' birth in a manger to save our lives and the escape to Egypt to save his, we don't just realize this truth — we feel it.” She goes on to say that “The promise of this text is God's presence and power when the powers of this world — sin and death — try so very hard to convince us of God's absence. Mary and Joseph knew better, and so do we. From a manger, to the respite found in the land that once enslaved, to a quiet town in Galilee, God will be there.”

Herod knew that if Jesus reigned his own empire would be revealed for what it was; built on fear, submission and violence. Jesus stands in stark contrast. Herod exerted his power over the people, while Jesus revealed his power by accompanying people, humbling himself even unto death. I mentioned in my Top 5 Newsletter before Christmas that the Latin American tradition of the Posada, a Christmas party, features a pinata. The original pinatas were made of clay pots and they were decorated with paper-mâché and ribbons. Shaped like a star, seven paper cones symbolized the seven cardinal sins. Breaking the pinata represents the triumph of faith over sin. Fruits and sweets tumble down representing the goodness of God. But the person who breaks that pinata is significant-it's a

child. Turns out we are called to turn our attention to the innocents among us, not just to protect them, but to learn from them.

In this morning's text, God uses dreams to shape people's lives. Joseph dreams and takes Mary as his bride. The magi dream and return home without revealing Jesus' birthplace to Herod. Joseph dreams of Herod's threat and the family flees to Egypt, and then he dreams again when it's safe to return. The theologian Bruce Epperly believes that "Dreams reveal divine wisdom. When we listen to God's whispering in our lives, we are often led on unexpected pathways of personal growth. Synchronicities emerge, guiding us toward new possibilities; luring us toward safety in threatening situations. Such messages may come to us all the time, but we are seldom sensitive to their wisdom." As you think of how you want to spend your year, I invite you to create space for God's messages to come through. Maybe God is inviting you to slow down, do less, be still, listen.

This morning, you will notice that we have a different kind of offering. On the index card that you received in your bulletin, you are invited to write down an intention or commitment you want to make to God for the year ahead. You don't need to put your name on it, no one will be checking up on you. If you're having trouble deciding what to write, I urge you to keep it

simple. I imagine that when you really think about it, there is one thing above all others that would be an appropriate offering to God. I know there is for me. One relationship to mend, a hardness in our heart that needs to be healed, something to let go of, an act of service or devotion. Only you know what that is.

In addition to making an offering, we will invite you to receive a gift—a star word, with a word taken from this morning's texts. These are for you to keep—tuck them away in a special place—a book, a journal, the car, for you to reflect on. God offers us everything we could possibly need, so in return we offer our lives, in small, but powerful ways—with our time, our energy, our talents, our hearts. As we start this year, let us attune our ears to the messages of God in our midst—speaking through children, in dreams, in joyful song and service, in moments of peace, and even in places of violence and suffering. God is here, in all of it, holding innocence and loss together in this world he loves so much. Amen.