

First Sunday After Christmas  
29 December 2019

Rev. Jacob Snowden

**Is 63:7-9; Ps 148**  
**Hebrews 2:10-18**  
**Mt 2:13-23**

**Live into Hope -- Through Compassion**



John August Swanson, Flight Into Egypt, 2002

*In many fragments and many fashions the Lord spoke to our ancestors, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.*

These are the opening lines of Hebrews. Hebrews, several scholars have suggested, is not a letter but a sermon. As far as sermons go, this is a deep dive into theological waters--specifically Christological waters--about who Jesus is and what Jesus accomplishes. For that reason, it fits well for this first lesson after Christmas.

I'll make another note about the book of Hebrews. In my reading I imagine a perturbed preacher. Consider the end of Chapter 5 and beginning of chapter 6 as translated from Eugene Peterson's The Message and the NRSV--that's the New Revised Snowden Version:

"I want to say so much, but it is hard to get it across to you since you've picked up this bad habit of not listening. By this time you ought to be teachers yourselves, yet here I find you need someone to sit down and spoon feed you--no not spoon feed! You babies still need bottles!

"Won't you leave the finger-painting behind and get on with the good stuff! It's time to hear something besides repentance, trusting God, baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection, and eternal judgment."

This is what the writer says to the Hebrew congregation. I'm not saying that about you. You're great! What this Hebrews homily wants so desperately is to see a church moving into maturity and thinking in new ways. That's my hope too.

With encouragement from Hebrews, let's take a deep dive into the waters of this Christmastide, letting that tide wash over us and carry us into the New Year with a renewed sense of how we can "Live into Hope through Compassion," my sermon title for today. So let's dive in; listen for the word of God in Hebrews 2:10-18:

*It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying,*

*“I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.”*

*And again,*

*“I will put my trust in him.”*

*And again,*

*“Here am I and the children whom God has given me.”*

*Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

God, we are your children. So, like children after Christmas, help us to enjoy the gifts you give to us--namely your great compassion shown in your son. Help us to be excited for the chance to share and explore your gifts this morning. And maybe have some fun with them too. Amen.

We started with a striking sentence. I'll abridge it:

*It was fitting that God...should make the pioneer of...salvation perfect through suffering.*

This is a beautiful way of understanding what is critical about Christmas. At the birth of the Messiah, there was unlimited potential for how God would act in the world. The Christmas story realizes God's choice to work in the world through Christ's suffering--the way of compassion.

To give some bearings for where we're going this morning, I want us to look at both Jesus and Herod, imagining how differently the two of them wield their power. We'll look at Hebrews, then Matthew, then leave with a challenge for the New Year ahead.

In the passage we've just read, what is the writer saying? What's at stake theologically? Here's a \$2 sentence from Ronald Goetz, long-time editor of "Christian Century," explaining a trend in the way people have understood God's suffering:

*“The ancient doctrine of divine impassibility and immutability has been largely rejected by contemporary theologians — and the ancient Theopaschite heresy that God suffers has, in fact, become the new orthodoxy.”*

I mean what more needs to be said? Sermon over, right? Here's my \$2 translation:

The ancient idea that God neither suffers nor changes has itself changed in light of theologians after the horrors of the World Wars, the Holocaust, and the Nuclear Bomb. The idea that God is compassionate, literally that God suffers with us, has in fact become the new norm for understanding God.

Let me put it another way, what we're asking is if God in God's infinite power can be hurt. On your bulletins or with a thumb, give a yay or nay to that question. Can the words, actions, and welfare of God's creation harm God?

Is God moody? Would God walk away from us, forsake us, tire of us, change God's mind about us because God grows tired of being hurt? Is it unimaginable that we could break God's heart?

In the deep waters of the questions of God's suffering, a certain orthodoxy has said, "Of course God would never turn from us. God's love for us and faithfulness to us could never change." We cannot hurt God in that way, because God's love is tough enough that nothing strikes at it.

On the other hand, does this sort of orthodoxy mean the heart of God is so tough it is hard or cold? How could we--who understand our love by the depth of our grief and the heights of our joy--relate to a God who is emotionally immovable? Are those against God's suffering saying none of our tragedies ever touch the heart of God? Considering your initial answer, did your initial answer about God's suffering waver at all?

Against these concerns comes this homily to the Hebrews. We read:

It fits. It makes sense. Because Jesus himself was tested by suffering, he is able to help those who are suffering. *Therefore Jesus became like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God.*

For all of the tinsel and twinkle of the holidays, there is a danger to Christmas. Just as the Christmas story in Matthew tells us that Jesus and family were pushed out of home, there are places in the Christmas story we don't really want to go, right?

How does suffering coincide with Christmas hope, peace, joy, and love? These passages in Hebrews and Matthew are unsettling. I mean, how do we sing "Joy to the World" and talk about what Herod did--genocide, infanticide?

Well, today is about going where we don't want to go and asking why would God act in this way? Martin Luther King wrote in his [Pilgrimage to Nonviolence](#):

"My personal trials have taught me the value of unmerited suffering. As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways in which I could respond...either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force...I have attempted to see my personal ordeals as an opportunity to transform myself and heal the people involved... I have lived the past few years with the conviction that unearned

suffering is redemptive. There are some who find the cross a stumbling block, others consider it foolishness, but I am more convinced than ever before that it is the power of God unto...salvation.”

King is not advocating suffering for suffering’s sake, but attesting to the way compassion, especially God’s compassion, can transform our selves and situations for healing and redemption. The good news is that God is compassionate and suffers for us, in order to stand with us and help us. God enters places of suffering not from weakness, but to change places of suffering.

Now let’s look at the Matthew passage briefly.

An angel comes to Joseph in a dream. While we have heard angels before say, *Fear not*, this is different. This is a nightmare that sits you upright in a cold sweat... “Wake up! Run! Herod is coming for the child.” As Herod learns he has been tricked by the Magi, he goes on an infanticidal rampage.

Herod’s reaction to the wise men is a sign that he would do anything to keep his power. Contrast this with God in Christ who empties himself of power for the sake of those he loves.

Now Herod made contributions to Judea. He was a builder. Just as Jesus promised to raise the temple, Herod had spent years renovating and expanding the Temple--a pleasing if not pious undertaking. Herod fortified Masada, which would serve as a rebel fortress some years later. He built a Judean aristocracy from next to nothing, raising people out of poverty. Herod brought Roman baths and luxuries into what was and remains the most consistently contested square mileage in the world. He brought comfort where there was little before. He had an impossible job, so whether you call it political savvy or Machiavellian machinations, he made his mark on Judea. And God, perhaps you can imagine, could have sent a savior like that--a realist who somehow navigates and negotiates for a safe and secure Promised Land. This is what I meant when I said the birth of the messiah had all kinds of possibilities. Yet Hebrews highlights the remarkable way God chooses to save the world, through the way of compassionate suffering, not shrewd politicking.

As we approach a presidential election this coming year, won’t that give us something to think about?

Jesus knows in his bones right from birth what it is to suffer. From start to finish, God in Christ helps those with their backs against the wall because his back has been pressed there too.

God elects to join our suffering in solidarity not for suffering alone, but for redemption. Jesus goes places we’d rather not go. In Luke, we read he is born in a manger because there was no room in the inn. Walter Brueggemann writes provocatively:

“We do not know: perhaps [the inn] was full, but perhaps [the innkeeper] turned away such disheveled, weary, poverty-stricken customers as bad for business. If so, ‘no room’ was only an excuse. What excuses have you heard: No room at the front of the bus; no

room at lunch counters. No room at the polls, or in the schools. No room for people of color. Before that, no room for women. No room. No room. No room. Christ squeezed in anyway, made room in the inn, in the village of Bethlehem, and in the world. The Christ Child defied the verdict of “no room” and made room for many more.”<sup>1</sup>

This is how the suffering of the Christmas story can be good news to us. Christ has made room when there was no room. Christ has made a way when there was no way. Christ goes to places of suffering we would not have gone ourselves.

So here is the challenge. God chooses the way of suffering out of compassion and for our re+demption. As the brothers and sisters of Christ, we can choose to be compassionate in the same way--to go towards rather than away from the places of suffering. In Jesus’ birth, life, and death, Jesus engages our suffering. He compassionately, self-sacrificially, and deliberately engages suffering to show God’s will and redemptive love. We have the same opportunities.

So as the new year approaches, with both its hopes and fears, I hope that you resolve to live into hope through compassion, knowing that compassion and suffering go hand in hand. We need not turn from suffering--our own or the suffering of others. By facing and engaging our biggest challenges together, we can trust we still are held in God’s compassionate hands. That is what the nail scarred hands of Easter teach us as well as the suffering of Christmas.

Let us pray:

God of all compassion, help us, your children, to be compassionate in the way you are. We thank you for the gift of your son, Jesus, who exemplified how we might bear one another’s burdens and walk side by side in adversity. Give us the grace and courage to do just that as we step into this new year. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>Brueggemann, Walter. Celebrating Abundance: Devotions for Advent (p. 74). Presbyterian Publishing. Kindle Edition.