

“Little Baby Jesus Is A Threat and a Promise!”

Isaiah 63:7-9 Hebrews 2:10-18 **Matthew 2:1-13-23**

Scott B. Martin - December 30, 2007

Rev. Tom Wright recalls a response to his preaching at a big Christmas service one year. There was a very well known historian present who was famous for his skepticism for Christianity. He was only there because his family had persuaded him to come. After the service was over he approached Wright with a big smile on his face.

He said, “I’ve finally worked out”, he declared, “why people like Christmas.”

Wright simply responded, “Really? Do tell me.”

The skeptic went on, **“A baby threatens no one, so the whole thing is a happy event which means nothing at all!”** (*Matthew for Everybody, p. 13*)

Christmas is a wonderful time of the year. What’s not to like, except maybe too many fruitcakes! There’s great music and singing. There’s the joy of giving and receiving gifts. In the northern hemisphere dreary winter days are transformed into a winter wonderland of lights, wreathes and nativity scenes. It is also a time for families and friends to gather from near and far and create marvelous memories of what it means to be family and friends. None of this is inconsequential. If we didn’t have Christmas we would have to create something else to give us an excuse to experience these things. None-the-less the skeptics charge that deep down this celebration of the birth of Christ **“is a happy event that means nothing at all”** because **“a baby threatens no one”** must be faced.

As Christians we know that Jesus didn't come into the world to give us an excuse to have a party, or to decorate our trees, homes and streets. Jesus didn't come so we might be prompted to give gifts to one another and thus boost the economy. Jesus didn't come so we would set up Nativity scenes to celebrate his birth. Jesus didn't come so we would have candle light worship services celebrating his birth.

Now, let's be clear, it doesn't mean that these things don't have any value, they do. It certainly doesn't mean we need to stop doing them. It does mean that we need to take a deeper look at Jesus, his birth, life, death and resurrection. While we may not have to give up Christmas trees, carols, candlelight services, gift giving and family gatherings; Jesus and what he stands for, might well threaten things we do or don't do and the world we have grown accustomed to. After all Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God in which the "last shall be first and the first last", a kingdom where those who seek to preserve their life will lose it and those who lose their life for the kingdom of God will gain it, a kingdom where our true family are those who do the will of God, a kingdom where we are to seek first the kingdom of God and all other things that are important and needed, will be added to our lives.

Matthew makes it clear that even as a baby Jesus was a threat to the powers that be in his day. The baby Jesus is a threat because he is not just any baby, but a King and not just any king, but Emmanuel, God with us! King Herod knows that there can only be one king and Herod wants to do everything in his power to make sure that that king is himself!

We know that Herod was not squeamish about using raw power to ensure his throne. Historians tell us that he had some of his own family members killed, when he thought they were plotting against him. He even had one of

his own wives killed! Killing some peasant woman's baby or even a whole village of babies to kill a threat to his throne, was nothing to him. This, of course, is the whole problem. Herod's priorities are all wrong and they have devastating consequences for those around him. Wright points out that **“Whatever else you say about Jesus, from his birth onwards, people certainly found him a threat. He upset their power games, and suffered the usual fate of people who do that.”** (*Matthew for Evreybody*, p. 14)

This Christmas season is not different than any other in that amidst our holiday revels pain and suffering of all kinds still afflicts our world, both in our individual lives and families, in our communities, and in the world. Our holiday revels provide a needed distraction and relief from these things, but the pain and suffering go on.

I have probably had at least two or three people come up to me and ask me if I saw the news that a young girl, who had just gotten a new bicycle for Christmas, was out riding it and was killed by a car. I had, as I am sure many of you have. In our own Faith family we lost one of our beloved members, Tony Marburger. Tony's funeral was just yesterday. Then there was the news of Benazir Bhutto's assassination in Pakistan, with all the accompanying riots, death, and the ongoing threat of global terrorism.

While it might provide a welcome distraction, the cute and cuddly, nativity scene baby Jesus has very little to say to any of these things. It is an awesome thing to believe that God sent his Son Jesus into this world where many mothers, like Rachael of long ago, are weeping for their children and the world they have to live in. Our world too knows much of wailing and lamentation. Ramah is not the only place that has known this, so has New Braunfels, Baghdad, Darfur, Islamabad, Johannesburg, Rio De Janeiro, and

London. Everywhere one looks in this past year there has been wailing and loud lamentation.

The glorious wonder of the incarnation is that Emmanuel, God with us, came into this world of pain and suffering. As Tom Wright puts it, **“No point in arriving in comfort, when the world is in misery; no point in having an easy life, when the world suffers violence and injustice! If he is to be Emmanuel, God with us, he must be with us where the pain is.”**

As if this wasn't amazing enough Jesus comes to bring God's salvation, so it is that we sing **“O little town of Behlehem, how still we see you lie! Above your deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by; Yet in your dark streets shines forth the ever lasting light, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in you tonight.”**

Matthew sees in Jesus' birth the “hopes and fears of all the years” coming to birth in the dark, pain filled world. So it is that Matthew finds in the death of the innocents, in the Holy Families escape to Egypt and their coming back to reside in Nazareth, hints of “hopes and fears of all the years” coming to fruition in the birth of Jesus. He finds in this birth and the events to follow, echoes of the ancient prophets stories and words. Jesus is the shoot from the stump of King David. Jesus is the beginning of a new relationship with God, a new covenant in which God will be our God and we will be God's people. A New Age has begun with the birth of Jesus. A new Exodus to God's Promised Land has begun. A new King has come to replace the old and so it is that the baby Jesus is both a threat and a promise. God's kingdom of grace and love awaits us. May 2008 be a year in which we and the world come to recognize this in new and deeper ways. Amen.

