

# The Disturbing Story of Jesus and the infants

This is the disturbing part of the story of Christmas,  
The part we tuck into the Sunday after Christmas

We have had the magic  
The angel Gabriel telling Mary she will become great with child  
And we have had the manger  
And the shepherds in the fields.

All of these stories have their disturbing elements  
But they can be recast - the humble peasant girl who will give birth to a king has elements of cinderella  
The baby in a manger appeals to anyone who likes animal-human harmony - elements of the jungle book perhaps  
And the shepherds seeing angels in the fields appeals to our sense of the poor and outsiders being at the heart of the the story - Dickens Christmas Carol

But the after-story of Christmas is an unavoidably disturbing story, we avoid it in our carols, and we downplay it in our nativity plays.

The feel-good factor is gone, but I want to remember a lesson that was taught to me by a former member of Weem, Marion Campbell - Marion was a former Sunday school teacher, a woman who was impeccably dressed every morning in Church, and who was always full of the warmest, most encouraging words. When I prepared her funeral tribute, I was more than a little surprised to discover that she was a fan of horror movies. How could such a genteel woman be a fan of gore, and apparently the gorier the better.

Marian had come to a truth that all great writers and storytellers have known - that we need difficult stories to hold the truth about a difficult world.

If the only stories we tell are saccharine and nice, then we are asking for dishonesty, silencing, and we are also making a subtle statement about God, that our understanding of God is too brittle and fragile to cope with the complexity of the world. We need a neat and tidy world to accommodate our neat and tidy God, and we have to keep making the world tidy to keep buttressing our attempts at belief.

There comes a point when we have to let the world be the world and let God be God, and still believe that God can be present in such a world.

But first of all I want to note that we need our dark and difficult stories to hold a dark and difficult world, and what Marian Campbell taught me is that dark and difficult stories will not turn us into a horrible person. In fact there might be a link between just how lovely Marion was and her ability to engage with difficult stories. As the movie critic Mark Kermode puts it, makers of horror movies and fans of horror movies are some of the nicest people you are ever meet, and makers of family movies are some of the most horrible people you were ever meet.

## **Disturbing Dreams**

The story of Christmas in Matthew's gospel is driven by four dreams of Joseph, and every single one of them is a disturbance. The last three of these dreams are in these section of Matthew.

The first dream is the one that he receives, telling him to stay engaged with Mary. This is a disturbance because Joseph seems to have understood that the smoothest social course lay in him quietly breaking off his engagement to Mary (engagement was so serious that the word "divorce" was used to here). By staying with Mary, he was somehow exposing both him and her to the disgrace and ostracism of their community; indeed by having a wedding where she was known to be pregnant (and the rumours would be that it might be Joseph who was the father, and other rumours that it was not) then attention was being drawn to a pregnancy that did not fit with expectation. And he goes through with this because of this dream, the one asking him to take Mary as his wife, the one to take the more upsetting course.

The second dream is the dream that tells him to escape to Egypt. This is the dream that sends him to safety, but it is the safety of an asylum seeker, the safety that is the begrudging safety of a host community that will inevitably resent the presence of Jewish foreigners, the disturbance of being amongst the hated enemy the Egyptians, the disturbance of leaving behind links in Bethlehem.

The third dream is the dream that sends Mary and Joseph back, but back into Israel, and potentially into the arms of Herod Archelaus - the son of Herod and himself a feared tyrant. And the fourth dream is the dream that sends them to Nazareth, the strange backwater in the north, the place that nobody has ever heard of, the need to sort out a new life for the third or fourth time in as many years. And in Matthew's telling this too is a strange place.

In each case, God is the author of this disturbance, this God making life difficult for Mary, Joseph and Jesus, and since he is making life difficult for Jesus, then it is God making life difficult for God.

This is a God we know too well in our lives, although the our nice stories try to hide it - this is the God of unwelcome interruption, this is the God of the dream which breaks our social ties, which brings us into a strange land. It is the God who goes against versions of religion which are in love with the status quo; the religion which reaffirms all our prejudices, and leaves us with a feeling of saccharine escapism rather than genuine comfort. Such a religion may too often have taken root in the Church, but it is completely alien to the faith you read about in the Bible.

So on this last Sunday of the year, let us pay attention to the holy disturbances, the discomfiting dreams which we have had to attend to in the past 12 months. You may not have told anyone these, they may be unrealised, but you know what they are - if God is God, then there are dreams that take us to the place where all the usual certainties fall away and we are left with only God.

## **Disturbing Suffering**

The disturbance of this story is the suffering of it.

Nobody wants to spend too much time with suffering. As a woman in my former congregation used to say about bereavement, if you are a hurting person, then you are not a nice person, and hurting people are difficult to be around.

This is a story of suffering.

This is a story which asks us to listen to the weeping and unconsolated crying of Rachel, whose children, "are no more".

And the question is to God, "Why?".

Why do much collateral damage in this story - could God not have sent dreams to all the other parents of two years olds in the Bethlehem and "surrounding area" to tell them to get out of harms way. Why does God choose a way that involves so much death?

I have told the story before of Kate Bowler, a Christian researcher into the prosperity Gospel who was diagnosed with stage IV cancer in her mid-30s. She realised that though she had researched Prosperity gospel, and held it at a distance - she had believed her own prosperity gospel, that if you were good and faithful, then essentially things would be alright.

Writing about her experience in the New York Times, she was inundated with letters of response. You would not believe the letters she received. One letter said "you think you have it bad, what do you think it was like to be told in adult life that you had been adopted".

Many of letters though tried to neaten her story, tried to get the certainty back because they were afraid of doubt - they want to turn her story, with all its challenge, back into moralistic Disney-esque fairy tale.

There were the minimisers who told her that this nothing and she would go to heaven  
There were the teachers who told her that God was using this to help her grow  
And there the judges who told her that this was because she had sinned.

None of these letters helped. The compounded the pain.

The man who wrote to her said that even when he found his neighbour had been killed by the burglar, even then he felt presence.

A suffering story is still a story... and if we matter, then our story matters.

My friend Alison, to whom I have often referred, as part of our work helped fund and set up an academic department in Gaza. Her colleagues there do not expect to live. They have often been on the phone to Alison and in their calls, when they can get through, they ask one thing above all - that Alison will record and remember their story. Stories matter that much.

That is what this story seems to be testifying- in amongst all the crazy, God can still be there. God is still there, and oftentimes we get to feel it. To know it.

In both stories, in all their refusal of neat narratives, God is utterly present.

We cannot read this story today without hearing the cry of Rachel still crying.

In the Holy Land, in Gaza today, Rachel is still weeping for her children, and she refuses to be comforted.

There are the 1,200 innocents killed by Hamas attackers on the 7th October  
There are the 21,000 innocents killed in Gaza, 9,000 children;  
that is 10,000 Rachels

And the question they are asking us is do you hear.

The longest scriptural quotation in the whole of the Christmas story, is asking us to listen to Rachel weeping:

"A voice is heard in Ramah  
Weeping and crying loudly  
Rachel is weeping for her children  
And she refuses to be comforted  
Because they are no more".

Last Saturday in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Bethlehem, the Rev Munther Isaac preached an excruciating sermon, of the silence of the Churches of the West which are have remained silent in the presence of slaughter, and yes, of genocide - what happens meets every definition.

*The world is watching; Churches are watching. Gazans are sending live images of their own execution. Maybe the world cares? But it goes on...*

*We are asking, could this be our fate in Bethlehem? In Ramallah? In Jenin? Is this our destiny too?*

*We are tormented by the silence of the world. Leaders of the so-called "free" lined up one after the other to give the green light for this genocide against a captive population. They gave the cover. Not only did they make sure to pay the bill in advance, they veiled the truth and context, providing political cover. And, yet another layer has been added: the theological cover with the Western Church stepping into the spotlight.*

*The South African Church taught us the concept of "The state theology," defined as "the theological justification of the status quo with its racism, capitalism and totalitarianism." It does so by misusing theological concepts and biblical texts for its own political purposes. Here in Palestine, the Bible is weaponized against. Our very own sacred text. In our terminology in Palestine, we speak of the Empire. Here we confront the theology of the Empire. A disguise for superiority, supremacy, "chosenness," and entitlement. It is sometimes given a nice cover using words like mission and evangelism, fulfillment of*

*prophecy, and spreading freedom and liberty. The theology of the Empire becomes a powerful tool to mask oppression under the cloak of divine sanction. It divides people into "us" and "them." It dehumanizes and demonizes. It speaks of land without people even when they know the land has people – and not just any people. It calls for emptying Gaza, just like it called the ethnic cleansing in 1948 "a divine miracle." It calls for us Palestinians to go to Egypt, maybe Jordan, or why not just the sea?*

*"Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" they said of us. This is the theology of Empire.*

What do we do in the face of such terror?

We listen... and we let people know we are listening.

We speak and say this is a terror.

Whether it is the Hamas gunman

Or the IDF drone

Innocents are being killed

I am much vexed here - what do we do?

We cannot pretend that there is one side and another side, and the truth is in-between

We cannot see this through the lease of Jew or Arab, but of humans

We have to see where the Herods will make an equation - that many innocent lives can be lost to ensure my survival.

Munther Isaac carried on...

*If Jesus were to be born today, he would be born under the rubble in Gaza. When we glorify pride and richness, Jesus is under the rubble...*

*When we rely on power, might, and weapons, Jesus is under the rubble...*

*When we justify, rationalize, and theologize the bombing of children, Jesus is under the rubble...*

*Jesus is under the rubble. This is his manger. He is at home with the marginalized, the suffering, the oppressed, and displaced. This is his manger.*

*I have been looking, contemplating on this iconic image.... God with us, precisely in this way. THIS is the incarnation. Messy. Bloody. Poverty.*

*This child is our hope and inspiration. We look and see him in every child killed and pulled from under the rubble. While the world continues to reject the children of Gaza, Jesus says: "just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me." "You did to ME." Jesus not only calls them his own, he is them!*

*We look at the holy family and see them in every family displaced and wandering, now homeless in despair. While the world discusses the fate of the people of Gaza as if they are unwanted boxes in a garage, God in the Christmas narrative shares in their fate; He walks with them and calls them his own.*

Here the presence of God is comfort.

God is in the story

The letters that helped Kate Bowler, were the letters that told her that God was still in the story.

The letters that did help were the ones that testified to the here-ness of God in the middle of inexplicable events. She cited the example of the man who had been kidnapped at gun point by an intruder to his home, a long with his wife and child; by a man who threatened to hang him and kill his wife and child. And do you know, he said, I felt God there. I know this sounds inexplicable, but I felt God there. Now this is not the universal experience of suffering, and this sense of divine presence is usually temporary - but it is a phenomenon - God is there.



There seems to be something about the Christmas story which points to the Easter story. In both, the forces of evil show their hand (whether they be the political game-playing Herod who eliminates any threat to his power at any cost at Christmas, or the princes of religion and empire who eliminate any threat to their power, at any cost, at Easter), and in which innocents will suffer (the innocents of Bethlehem at Christmas, God himself at Easter) and in mothers and women do the dreadful work of mourning (which happens in both stories).

I think that Joseph is our guide here...

You keep walking into the places where the dreams lead you  
You keep walking knowing that the story matters  
And the story of those who suffer matters  
You keep walking asking for the faith to know that God is with you  
And you keep the people safe who matter to you, as best you can

And you love, and you love, and you love  
And you hope and you hope and you hope  
And you believe and you believe and you believe  
That God is in the story.

AMEN