

The Threatened Present in the Presence of the Future

From the series: The Presence of the Future

Text: Matthew 2:3; 2:18

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I left off last week with the question, "Where is the future going? What will become of us? Where will the process lead next?" And I admitted that we simply do not know. We do not know about the things of the beginning and that's why the Hebrews long ago wrote stories, stories of a Garden of Eden, of a tree and a couple and a snake. Neither do we know things of the future and therefore, people have created stories about the end, visions and dreams of what might be. Visions and dreams that reflected their deep yearning and their longing. But, we noted last week that those stories of the end, the visions painted by the biblical writers, the expectation and anticipation of the Apostles simply were not realized in the way that they thought they would be, and for 2000 years now we have perpetuated those stories, even though they don't really mesh with our understanding of reality and its cosmic form or its historic manifestation. And so, we noted that it is time for a new paradigm, for a new model of the end. We no longer really, literally, actually wait for the coming of our Lord in the sense of that Second Coming as it is expressed in the scriptures.

But, the good news is that Jesus has come again and again and again and again, for he said, "I will come to you, I will not leave you alone, orphaned." And so, we noted that the key to a biblical understanding of history can better be understood under the word Immanuel, the name God With Us, God with us in the midst of the process, the Creator-Spirit from the beginning in that cosmic development of 15 billion years, emerging finally into history with the development of human consciousness and awareness, the development of human cultures. The story of human history of which we are at the vortex, moving into the future, continuing to write the story. And so, we need a new vision, a new dream, a new paradigm, a new model for that understanding of the cosmos from which we have emerged and the history in which process we find ourselves, so that we might have a life map and some orientation in order to find meaning and purpose in our present day, given the understanding we have of the human, of the world. We need a new paradigm in order that our faith vision may connect with our actual experience.

To the question, "Where is it going?" as in the Advent season we think about the future, we really don't know. I like the image of Martin Luther who gave expression to it this way. He said, if you can picture the infants baptized this morning, the secure and warm floating in the embryonic soup of the mother's womb until the moment of birthing arrives, the pain that shoves that little embryo down the birth canal and out into a world, kicking and screaming, what infant in the womb could conceive of the drastic transformation of its world in a moment's time, coming out into the harsh light and the chill of the real world into which it is being born?

I saw a photograph someone showed me this week, taken by the Hubbell space telescope of the Eagle Nebula, which was caught exploding. I don't know all the details, and I would be better off not even to attempt to describe what I saw in the photograph. It was like a cloud or an exploding star, I don't know, but there were a couple of little fingers that went up at the top of this mass of whatever was happening and the person who showed me the photograph said those two little fingers each are larger than our whole galaxy.

You can't conceive of it, can you? Space and time beyond our imagination and in such a world so amazing, so full of wonder, where the future is already present in incubation, where the future is already present in the Spirit, where the present is pregnant with the future - in such a situation, we have to come to understand Advent anew as it calls us to our task to be engaged in the human endeavor.

We need a new story that will energize us and motivate us to take responsibility for this history which is unfolding with us and through us, for, and I almost don't dare say this, lest I be struck with lightning, being raised a sturdy Calvinist as I was, but, even though I almost don't dare say it, I must say it - *the future is in our hands*. The future is in human hands, not apart from the Creator Spirit, but certainly in our hands now to move from that jungle survival instinct situation into which we have emerged, still having at the ready all of those survival skills that cling to us, threatened creatures that we are. It is our responsibility to move this cosmic drama, this unfolding history, this human story now, God's story - to move it into a future, into a new day, into a brighter tomorrow. That's the Advent task. And it's a heavy responsibility, and of course, we're not equal to it, we're not up to it, and we will foul it terribly. Such is the nature of human history. Such has been the course, and will continue to be the course, because the present is not only pregnant with the future, full of promise, it is full of peril, as well, and it is our responsibility to address that reality.

Let me give you a historical illustration from Matthew's Gospel. The birth of Jesus is being recounted. The story of the Magi from the east, the astrologers who saw the star that signalled the birth of royalty, they followed the star until it came to Jerusalem and, naturally, they went to the royal court to learn of the birth. But, the birth was not in the royal court with King Herod the Great on the throne, and

when he heard of a star to announce a birth of one born to be king, he was terribly threatened.

He was alarmed and afraid, and all Jerusalem with him, and he inquired of the scriptures where this event might be, and the scholars said to him, in Bethlehem. He sent the Magi there to seek out the child, requesting that they return to give him information, that he, too, might worship. But they, being warned, returned another way and when he recognized that he had been tricked, he was in a furious rage and decreed that all male children two years and under be slaughtered. That would fix any threat to the throne. And in the calendar of the Church, we call the event the Slaughter of the Innocents. One could write a story of human history under that title, the Slaughter of the Innocents.

Matthew, in telling the story, reaches back to Jeremiah, chapter 31, verse 15, where Jeremiah holds up the image of Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted because they are not. Rachel was the wife of Jacob in the Genesis story, his favorite wife who birthed him Joseph, his favorite son, who was given a coat with sleeves, whose brothers were jealous of him, who sold him off into Egyptian slavery, bringing back the special coat drenched in animal blood in order to convince their father that a wild beast had done him in. Jacob wept for his son, and we read that he refused to be comforted, because his son was not. On his way back from his uncle Laban, where he had gotten his wives and a family, Jacob came to Ramah in Galilee, where his beloved Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin, and Rachel's tomb is in Ramah, and centuries later the poet-prophet Jeremiah saw the devastation of Jerusalem, the torn down walls, the charred temple, the rape of the city, and he lamented over the terrible horror that had befallen Jerusalem and the people of God there, even though he had clearly foreseen it, and Jeremiah reached back to Rachel, because Rachel's tomb was on the way that the exiles had to take from Jerusalem to Babylon in captivity. Jeremiah said, as the exiles were making their way into captivity, passing Rachel's tomb, that Rachel was weeping in the tomb and would not be comforted because her children were not. And, when Jesus was born and King Herod decreed that the innocents be slaughtered, Matthew reaches back to weeping Rachel, weeping because her children are not, refusing to be comforted.

Those images are the stories of human history. If nature is red in tooth and claw, then the human story is a veritable river of blood and violence. It is a story of brutality and unthinkable cruelty. That is the story, the history for which we are responsible.

Such a history and such a story certainly makes it obvious why those who were dreamers and visionaries, who saw all of the hell on earth, longed for another world, for another day, for another reality - the prophetic vision of the lion and the lamb lying down together, therefore, the reconciliation of nature, where they would not hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain, therefore Peace, Shalom coming to earth. Were they not responding to the terrible violence and the hurt

and the pain, the Rachels weeping for their children because they were not? Certainly we can understand that eschatological hope, that yearning for something else, just as in the beginning they created stories about human responsibility because certainly the hell on earth could not be the consequences of a good God creating a good earth, therefore, stories of human rebellion. So, in the end are not those stories the human response to the harsh reality of human history, dreaming of another place and another time wherein dwells righteousness and justice marked by compassion and peace?

We can understand how the stories arise. But, if it denigrates our present unfolding historical reality and our engagement with it, then we need a new model and a new paradigm, because the Herods of this world are all too plentiful yet in our day.

Herod was half-Jew and half Edomite, the descendant of Esau. Herod had within himself Jacob and Esau, the conflict of brothers. It ran in his veins. He made himself useful to Rome and in 47 B.C.E. was appointed governor and then in 40, king, and he's called Herod the Great. He *was* great. He at one time melted down his own gold to buy corn for the starving masses in a famine. On another time, in difficult times, he remitted the taxes in order that the people might have some relief. That disruptive, disorderly people was brought to law and order, and peace reigned for that long reign of Herod the Great.

He was a great builder. People came from the ancient world to see Jerusalem and the marvels of its architecture, the glory of its buildings. Herod the Great.

And he was a suspicious man. I suppose we'd call him a paranoiac today. He had his wife murdered, and her mother, Alexandra. He had his eldest son murdered, and two other sons. When he came to power, he had the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court, slaughtered. At another time he had slaughtered 300 court officials. He had a long reign, you see. And when he was about to die, he retired to Jericho, having had the leading citizens of Jerusalem arrested on trumped up charges and imprisoned with the order that at the moment of his death they would be put to death, because Herod said no one will mourn Herod's death, but at Herod's death, nonetheless, tears will flow. Caesar Augustus, Emperor of Rome, said it is better to be Herod's pig than Herod's son.

So, he was Herod the Great, at times moved with compassion, able to administer, create order and peace. And he was a murderer, taken over by brutality and violence and unspeakable horror, causing Rachel to weep in her tomb because her children are not.

That's the human story, and again, one can understand in the midst of the furnace, as was true of those early Christians at the end of the first century when the fires of persecution were burning, that they looked heavenward and said, "Maranatha. Our Lord come." Who wouldn't want to escape the fiery furnace?

Who wouldn't want release and relief from the anguish of this human experience?

But, it is not so and it will not be so. It is for *us* to take responsibility and to change our world by the grace of God and the Spirit that is at work within us, the Spirit of the Jesus who comes again and again and again to those who are of open heart and open mind. It is for *us* to bring in a new day in our world, not to yield to cynicism or to bitterness, never to give up, but to work with hope unconquerable for a better world.

On the 10th of December in 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is a fine document, speaking to the rights of every human being, social, political, economic, the kind of rights, the kind of regard that one, simply being human, should be accorded. It was celebrated this past week. It has only made a small dent in the realities and the brutalities of our history, and yet, it has made a mark, for this same week Jack Straw, the British Home Secretary, determined that General Pinochet could be extradited to Spain to be tried for human atrocities. And those who study these things are celebrating the fact that there is at least this one token sign that no dictator or totalitarian, evil leader of any nation can with impunity slaughter and kill.

Herod is still alive and well on planet Earth, and we could point to several places on the globe where it is happening, even now. But, at least Pinochet, who was the military leader who led the coup that led to the assassination of the Socialist, duly elected Aliende some years ago in Chile - you remember the story? We were complicit in that action. We supported the coup that upended Aliende whose politics was threatening to the U.S. of A. This place of human rights and freedom and liberty has a very colored, checkered past in regard to universal human rights. We have been self-serving and self-protective, like every other people. We have had a strain of Herod in us, now and again, as I think Roosevelt said, who was instrumental in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, about some Latin dictator that we were supporting. "He's a son of a bitch, but he's *our* son of a bitch."

In Advent 1998, if we want to keep Advent, if we want to be faithful followers of Jesus, it is that kind of pragmatism, that kind of politics of expediency, the kind of toying that's going on in the Congress of the United States, even now, it is that against which we must speak as the followers of Jesus. As the angels said to the disciples when Jesus was ascending in clouds of glory, "Why stand you gazing up?" Get on with the work, because the responsibility is yours and mine, and we might be utterly frustrated if we try to change the whole world, but at least let us be certain that in *this* community of faith every human being is accorded dignity, that no one is excluded, no one is slighted, no one is denigrated, no matter who they are, no matter what their history, and that when it comes to the broader

community, let us be with clear voice taking the stand for all of the things for which the prophet longed and the church in its cry, "Maranatha," has yearned for.

Jesus is not going to come back and do it for us. Jesus waits for us to follow him into the fray.