

## “Taking the high road”

December 30, 2007

Text: *Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:13-23*

### I.

This reading from Matthew is an amazing text. It comes right after the visit of the famous *wise men from the east*, who have now left Judea to return home. They’d observed the rising star of the child, *born to be king of the Jews*, and had come to pay him homage.

But now, they had departed. And immediately, danger, it seems, is everywhere; which gives us an idea about the context: these were perilous times.

Joseph is warned in a dream: *Get up, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.*

So, to protect his young family, Joseph flees; and with Mary and the baby Jesus, he’s off to Egypt.

Meanwhile, the vile Herod, paranoid and fearful as always, goes on the warpath. Herod wants no rivals—not unusual behavior for a king. But, still, Herod’s reaction is excessive. In a rage, he orders the killing of all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or younger.

After some time passes, Joseph learns in another dream that Herod has died and that it is now safe for him to return to Israel with his wife and child. However, arriving in Israel, he learns that Herod’s son, Archelaus, is now the ruler ... and wanting to stay clear of him, he goes to the district of Galilee, making his home in a town called Nazareth.

But again, what’s striking about all of this is the danger and darkness that surrounded Jesus’ birth ... which reminds us of the evil forces at work in the world. And of course, the *way* of Jesus will be the way of peace ... the way of *suffering love*.

These same forces of evil will eventually **put Jesus to death** on an awful cross ... and God will use his death for God’s redemptive purposes. But salvation will come, not through the sword, but through a *suffering* and *sacrificial love*.

### II.

If all of this is true ... and if *suffering love* is indeed the way of God’s Christ, we have a long way to go in understanding and interpreting this message. We have some serious challenges on our plate as the people of God—Christians, Jews, Muslims, all of us. We’ve got work to do.

To begin with, we must find ways of dealing decisively with the rise in extremism over the last decade or so. As individuals and as nations, we must evolve to the point where extremism and the violence it unleashes are simply unacceptable.

The mindless death a few days ago of **Benazir Bhutto**, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, puts a very human face on this challenge that is before us.

To be sure, in recent times, the mix of violence and religious faith is certainly an abomination to the one Creator God, the God of Christians, Jews, Muslims ... and all religions.

As human beings, in addition to being people of faith, we must find ways of defusing and eradicating these impulses for violence. We must find ways of building a new world, based on mutual respect, trust, compassion and love.

Certainly, this was God's purpose in the Incarnation to begin with. The Savior born at Christmas comes to save the world from our sins ... and to usher in a world of peace.

But how to get there?

### III.

Always, the world needs a new vision and a new hope. A vision and hope that can move us beyond yesterday ... beyond all the senseless death and untamed evil that has come over the earth.

The prophet Isaiah offers just such a vision. Out of dire circumstances, during the time known as the *restoration*, the prophet sounds such a word of hope:

***Arise and shine***, he says, ***for your light has come ... the Lord will rise upon you and his glory will appear over you ... and nations shall come to your light***.

**Nations will come to your light.** What an astounding claim! Exactly what is Israel's light? And why would other nations be drawn to it?

It all seems so improbable if we think about it. Israel has been a defeated nation. She's been in Babylonian exile for some fifty years. How and why would *nations be drawn to her light*?

### IV.

The answer is found in the experience of Exile itself. Israel has suffered; in yearning and intense longing, she has grieved, even despaired. On the other side of Exile, now, Israel has a more enlightened, more redeemed spirit. She sees things more clearly ...

with more perspective and more *big picture* awareness.

Having endured the suffering and all the deprivation and humiliation of Exile, Israel has an expanded sense of who she is ... and she has a more humble and grateful heart.

Suffering does this to us, or at least it can. It can serve to recreate us and to lift us to higher spiritual and moral ground.

And so, indeed, *Arise and shine ... for your light has come .... And although darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.*

And again, **Nations shall come to your light.**

After Exile, Israel reveals a new spirit with notably universalist impulses. Whereas, before Exile, Israel's sense of *covenant* (covenant with God) had been restricted to Israel only, it is now extended to include all the nations.

The point, both here with Third Isaiah and in our text from Matthew, is that there are evil forces we have to contend with in life ... and these forces are powerful. Herod and his like were a very real threat to the world Jesus was born in to. Just as religious extremism and fanaticism are a very real threat in our world today.

## V.

And so the Son of God comes—the *Prince of peace*—born into a world so often at cross purposes. He comes, extending an invitation to all people to the *spiritual* high ground. For the *spiritual* high ground is where true peace is found.

The problem is, the world doesn't believe it ... and it clearly doesn't choose it. The world much prefers its weapons and its elaborate armaments of dominion and control. The world prefers its aggression and its prideful acts of revenge and recrimination.

And too often, in our individual lives, with our families and friends, it's the same.

- False pride and ego get in the way, blurring the BIG PICTURE.
- We do things and say things and soon find ourselves going down a road where we *can't take it back* ... and before we know it, there's too much hurt.
- And stuff happens ... and years later, there's deep, painful regret.

The KEY, or course, is to *not* get to that point. And the way to *not get to that point*, is to take *the spiritual high road* today.

For Christians, what this means is to seek to live our lives in light of the *teachings* and the *spirit* of the **Sermon on the Mount** (love your enemies, turn the other cheek, and be a person of compassion and forgiveness). The way of the Savior is the way of *suffering and sacrificial love*.

That doesn't mean we're supposed to be a door mat for the aggression of others. It doesn't mean we're supposed to be weak-kneed and docile.

Clearly, there are times when we have to be assertive. There are times when we need to take a stand; times when we need to speak out with courage and conviction. But always it is a courage and a conviction rooted in the BIG PICTURE needs of family, community and world.

In conflict resolution, a kind and compassionate spirit goes a lot farther in reducing tension than a reaction of aggression and heavy-handedness.

## VI.

What would Jesus do in our world today? Always, a good question to ask ourselves. What would Jesus do ... in Pakistan ... in Iraq ... in Darfur, Sudan ... in Haiti? In the violent hotbeds of our cities here in America. And in the *strained nerves* of tension and conflict in our family life as well. What would Jesus do?

As a person of non-violence and *sacrificial love*, he would probably die a thousand deaths. And again and again, he would call us to the *high road*, to the *spiritual high ground*. The *high ground* is where we refuse to get down into the mud in any of our relations.

When we *take the high road*, we respond always out of the BIG PICTURE-needs of our lives.

*Taking the high road* means there are times when we're better off just letting things pass. In other words, just don't say anything. You know the times. Times when you're justifiably angry but the timing is just not good.

*Taking the high road* is an expression of *suffering love*. On the *high road* we understand that our lives are anything but perfect. And that, therefore, now and then we all need some slack. We need our family and friends to simply *not* over-react, grant us a period of grace, and give us a chance to work our way through whatever it is we're dealing with.

When we *take the high road*, we listen ... intently ... beyond our shaky self-centeredness; and we don't react prematurely. We may be firm and resolute (i.e., not wishy-washy), but because we have a sense of the BIG PICTURE, we're patient, waiting for the right moment.

## VII.

And so, friends, once again it's a New Year. And so let us resolve in the New Year to *take the high road* in all that we do.

That may mean we'll suffer a bit along the way. But that's alright. That was certainly Israel's experience. But now, having endured the suffering, she was *a light to the nations*. Through her suffering, a new *light* had come upon her.

And it's that way with us, too. Through our suffering, or our sacrificial spirit, a new light comes upon us.

1. It's the light of the *high ground*.
2. Like the light a **Mother Teresa** ... or a **Martin Luther King, Jr.** ... or a **Mahatma Gandhi** ... or a **Helen Keller** ...
3. And the light takes us to a *higher moral and spiritual place* ...
4. And the world knows ... and it makes a difference ... and people will be drawn to your light ... and they will be lifted to *higher spiritual ground* ...

***And nations will come to your light***, said the prophet. ***And kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around!***

And so, let the New Year come! And let us resolve to *take the high road* ... the road where peace, through compassion, forgiveness and love, can move us all closer to God's reign.

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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