



**Sermon at St. Andrew's Church  
Christmas 2 (B) – January 2, 2022  
by the Rev. Connie Jones**

*Matthew 2:13-23*

The best part of Advent when I was a little girl  
was being trusted to set up the ceramic Nativity set  
brought home from Germany by my father's father after the horror of World War I.  
I'd careful unwrap the tissue-paper protecting Mary and Joseph,  
and arrange them in the stable-like frame,  
angling them just so they could adore the baby Jesus.  
There was a random ox. Some shepherds and a bunch of sheep to set in a field nearby.  
Three kings. One camel.  
And an angel to keep watch and sing Gloria! if called upon.  
I remember thinking it odd, though,  
that there was also a Roman soldier, with helmet and sword at the ready,  
as well as a larger-than-scale animal with a bushy tale.  
Not a "friendly beast" at all, but a big, hungry, red fox.  
Had my father, as a child long ago, mistakenly wrapped up two other toys  
while putting the set away? Or was it somehow a relic  
of the war with heart-stopping numbers of deaths?  
Alas, I never got around to asking.

But it doesn't seem like an accident to me now.  
Because I've learned that whenever innocence is born,  
violence and evil and death draw near.  
I know that wickedness masquerades as good, too, often in high places.

I think of Herod, sending the Magi to find Jesus, “so that I may worship him too,” he lies.  
 And then, in a diabolical rage,  
 ordering his soldiers to murder all children under two,  
 lest one of them grow up to oust him from his throne.  
 The Church remembers the horror of this act  
 in the Feast of the Holy Innocents on December 28.

And by the way, do you remember  
 what Jesus called the equally sly and vicious *next* King Herod? *That fox!* he said.

Of *course* a soldier and a sword – standing for human violence and natural destruction –  
 belong in a Nativity set.  
 Because there’s no use sugar-coating the existence of evil,  
 or pretending that the history of humanity isn’t shot-through with violence and duplicity.  
 No use, either, pretending that evil infects *other* people but never ourselves.  
 Even children know better. Just look at their stories.

**But the big question** is, who put evil within reach of goodness in the first place?  
 Just who *did* put a snake in the Garden of Eden?

Philosophers and theologians have puzzled over this big conundrum for millennia –  
 if God is good, how can evil exist?  
 And if *God* is omnipotent, why doesn’t he save us from evil? And death?  
 These questions have driven millions to despair.....or atheism.  
 It breaks our hearts to tell our children, yes, it’s true.  
 Sometimes bad things *just happen*.  
 I’m sorry. I can’t tell you why. But there are a few things I do know.

First, that while evil wreaks havoc and pain abounds,  
 every coherent *story* – from a children’s book to a good novel to the parables of Jesus,  
 contains darkness.....Sin, or violence, or ignorance, or meanness, or unresolvable paradox.  
 We experience some version of it every day.  
 Let’s call it what Carl Jung did: the Shadow.  
 I promise you this is before my time,  
 but the old radio drama opened with an ominous voice saying  
 “Who knows what evil lurks in the heart of man? Only the Shadow knows.”

Every person whose story I’ve been privileged to hear

(and I'm always available to her *yours* by the way)–  
 every story has a dark streak running through it.  
 Some sort of snake in the garden of every family, every group, every nation.  
 The only stories *without* a dark chapter are told by the very young,  
 people deceiving themselves, or habitual liars.

I further know that failure to acknowledge pain done to you, or by you,  
 will make you sick.  
 And that blaming it on other people (while a popular practice)  
 only adds to the measure of evil in the world.  
 I know too that when I am incensed by blindness, stupidity or meanness in other people,  
 I should immediately look for those habits in myself.

I know too that people and families and nations  
 wise and humble enough to name their own shadow sides (as Germany is with Hitler)  
 are stronger and more inclined to virtue and healthy growth.  
 So too, people who bear wounds but survive will grow strong and true.

Spend time with these people. Follow them.  
 Turn to them when you are in pain, for they good guides and healers.  
 A therapist, perhaps, or a priest, a distant family member, a friend.  
 They might be the “Egypt” you flee to for safety – like Mary and Joseph and Jesus.  
 When it's time to restore you to the land of the living after loss or failure or pain,  
 get in the boat with someone who can see in the dark.  
 Who can show you the true Light that can save you.  
 Why else do we imagine that Jesus was born at midnight, “in the bleak midwinter”?

And most important of all, I believe this:  
 That the God who is weaving the whole tapestry of existence,  
 the whole fabric I'm one little thread in,  
 promises not only that the story has a good ending,  
 but that it is *good every step of the way*,  
 even when it hurts, or seems to make no sense  
 or you find foxes and Herods in the story.

**Near the end of the book of Genesis,**  
 which of course introduces us to the snake in the garden,  
 there's a resolution of the story of Joseph as he reunites with his brothers.

Way earlier in the story we learned that out of jealousy they kidnaped him,  
 dumped him in a dry well, then sold him to slave-traders who dragged him off to Egypt.  
 But Joseph survives in Egypt, thrives in fact,  
 and when he meets his brothers years later, he could clearly do them grave harm.  
 They are terrified.  
 But he joyfully embraces them. Acknowledging the truth but forgiving them, he says,  
 I know what you did. You intended it for evil. But God intended it for good.

### **Evil is no illusion.**

For reasons beyond our comprehension, it is permitted to exist –  
 in the hearts and actions of nature, and people, in nations and systems.  
 We can only say God, in his wisdom and love, somehow considered it *necessary*.  
 Until we discover and name evil, contend with it especially in ourselves,  
 we cannot be grownups.  
 We cannot be whole.  
 God only knows why.  
 But no matter how dark the world is just now, *your* world is just now,  
 open your eyes to see what the birth of Jesus, and his rising from the dead promise.....  
 and what is miraculously true *every day*.....  
 The Light shines in the darkness,  
 and the darkness cannot, *cannot*, overcome it.