

*"A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." – Matthew 2:18*

Over the last week there has been a lot of retrospectives in the media – on television, the radio, online – looking back at the year that was in 2016. Many of the retrospectives have been considerably negative – wishing good riddance to a year and hope for a better year to come. For many people, especially those who follow the entertainment world or US politics it was an especially difficult year. Over the last year it seems that an especially large number of celebrities and public figures have died – beginning with David Bowie and more recently Carrie Fischer – and the political environment that surrounded the Brexit vote and the US election and the hate and vitriol that came out of both elections has been tragic. And that's not even getting into the real tragedies of the world like the ongoing conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan. For many of you there might be personal reasons that 2016 was a less than stellar year – the death of family and friends, the loss of a job and many more reasons. Each of us probably have reasons we want to be rid of 2016, rid of the 'bad luck' or the bad experiences we had and look forward to the fresh slate that is 2017, the new opportunities, the new hope for better times – a better world.

A lot of the retrospectives suggested that 2016 was worse than 2015 – more deaths, more turmoil, more things that generally sucked – and perhaps one of the more tragic or bad years of recent memory. But if we're really honest with ourselves was it any worse? Do we really have any hope that this year to come will usher in peace in Syria or civility in Trump's Washington? Do we really believe that there won't be prominent celebrities and public figures who will die either tragically or perhaps less in this year to come? If we're honest with ourselves – really truly honest – the answer is no: the world turns, people hurt one another, there is a lot of darkness, there is a lot of death, there is a lot of Sin.

You might be itching to say to say to me "Graham, aren't we still in the Christmas season? Aren't we supposed to still be celebrating the joyous occasion of Jesus' birth? Why are you so negative, so cynical, so unjoyous?" And you'd be right: we are still in the Christmas season, we are still celebrating the joyous occasion of Jesus' birth – but we mustn't hide from reality while we do that – the Gospel writers certainly didn't! One of historic critiques that have been raised against religion and Christianity in particular is that it deals with the realms of fantasy, that it is the opiate of the masses as Karl Marx described, nothing but a fantastical look at the world that ignore the hard realities. While we might be tempted to escape the world and its problems in our lives of faith, when we read the Scriptures, we are confronted by stories that in no way sugar coat our world.

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On this the first Sunday after Christmas we are treated with the account from the Gospel of Matthew, which tells us of the Holy Family's flight from Bethlehem – the angel appearing to Joseph once more telling him to "Get up, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." That's quite the royal welcome for a newborn king, for the Messiah promised by the prophets, for Immanuel – God with us. The young Jesus, merely years after his birth is forced to become a refugee, forced to flee his homeland with his parents to a foreign land with the threat of death hanging over him as the long shadow of Herod's wrath stretched out from Jerusalem to crush the threat to his royal power. As we hear this story today it is hard not to think both about Israel's long history of exile and suffering and also the millions of refugees that fill up refugee camps throughout the world, fleeing their homes,

leaving families, the suffering and fear, the unknown future all under the threat of death and destruction.

This alone is enough to suggest that the Gospel is not interested in a rosy picture of the world but rather an honest assessment of what the world is – the fact that the very Son of God is forced to flee for his life because of the forces of death and Sin is a pretty good indication that we're not interested in sugar coating or whitewashing the truth, but our account goes further. Herod, once he learns that the wise men who visited Jesus have tricked him is furious, so furious that he decides that every child born in and around Jerusalem that are two years or younger – according to the time that he had learned from the wise men – should be put to death. Innocent children put to death because of one man's fear of Jesus – a horrific reality, a reality that still exists today. Children die throughout the world, for no reason other than powerful men are afraid, powerful men are afraid of losing their power, powerful men are afraid of men, women and children of faith. How many of us have been shocked over and over again by the images of children in Syria, Iraq, Rwanda, Serbia and on and on and on. Today as we hear the not so joyous, the not so happy story from the Gospel of Matthew we are reminded of the reason for why God came in the flesh, we are reminded the reason that Jesus came was the very darkness which threatened his life and the which took the lives of those innocent children around Bethlehem. Jesus came to deal with the darkness that threatens the lives of men, women and children to this day. God sent his Son Jesus to defeat the power of Sin and death, to open for us a way to experience transformation and light in the midst of darkness.

The Good News today is that God does not ignore the darkness and brokenness of the world, he does not whitewash and sugar coat it – at Christmastime we celebrate the God that comes beside us in the flesh, the God who comes beside it and experiences the full force of that darkness on the Cross. The promise of Christmas, the promise of the Gospel, is not that there will not be darkness in the world but that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. God does not intend for us to go through life with rose coloured glasses, seeing a world that does not exist but rather he intends that we might be witnesses to his light, witnesses to Jesus, who transforms the world of darkness into the Kingdom of light with each life, each community that comes into contact with Him.

And so this year when it seems that nothing has changed: when the first beloved celebrity dies or when the Trump administration does something indefensible – remember that Jesus is with us, that God loves this messed, dark world so much that he sent his Son to be with us; remember that as you exercise your God given faith, as you trust more and more in God's love and light made known to us in Jesus that perhaps your life, and the world around you will seem a bit brighter – not perfect but transforming by the work of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, for the glory of God the Father. May you know that God is with you this New Year, may you feel his presence in the darkest of moments and may your days be filled with his light.

Let us pray.