***Sermon Text for December 29, 2013***

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Isaiah 63:7-9, Matthew 2:13-23

“What happens after Christmas?”

I pray you had a wonderful Christmas and spent it with those whom you love unconditionally. I’m so glad I was able to remind all of us that God chooses to spend Christmas with us through the incarnation and how important that is for all of us. So how was your day after Christmas? Stacy and I woke up a bit later than usual, had our coffee in front of the fire, and just remembered Christmas and all of its great memories. It was peaceful and allowed us to think about the day.

Also on the day after Christmas we discovered the beautiful scarf that Rachel had bought for Naomi had something wrong with it. It was a beautiful scarf with flowers and soft colors. Naomi came down and opened it up completely for us and if you looked real closely, in amongst the flowers and the colors, you could see images of skulls and crossbones very tastefully hidden in the fabric. Quite a surprise.

Both of our Scriptures today contain post-Christmas realities that can be surprising and even shocking in the case of Matthew. Isaiah encourages us to remember. Think back on all that God has done for us, recount his gracious deeds. But the most dramatic of our readings today will be Matthew as it depicts the Holy Family in a very hectic reality. But the Gospel reminds us that we constantly need to have one foot set squarely in the incarnation of Christmas and the other fastened on the resurrection. We find ourselves between these bookends today.

First Presbyterian finds itself in such a place as we celebrate 3 resurrections this week and a generosity that will take your breath away, that will surprise you all, a way in which this church has been involved very directly in mission that you may not be aware of. Let’s read.

After Christmas we should know to expect the unexpected. This year we had a bookend of snow which surprised us all both on Christmas Eve and the day after Christmas. It was a bit dangerous. But it couldn’t really compare to the danger that the Holy Family faced after the birth of their first child on Christmas morning.

Remember all that we read in Matthew this morning takes place after Jesus was born in Matthew 1:25, after the shepherds visit him in Luke, after the wisemen came to the home to see him and leave their gifts in 2:11. When we picked up in verse 13 the presents have been put away, the strange visitors are gone. The house is quiet with just the three of them, well as quiet as a house can be with an infant son.

Joseph gets another visit soon after Christmas. He had already seen this visitor before and this visitor always seemed to come with unsettling, but life saving news. It was an angel and he tells Joseph to take the boy and his mother, four times that phrase is used. Take the boy and his mother. You see the order of importance there? Not your wife, not Mary, not Jesus the Savior of the world, but the boy and his mother. Escape to Egypt because they are planning to take your life. There was a large settlement of Jews still in Egypt and historically it was the country, or the region where the Jews went when there was trouble in the homeland. Boy, that sure has changed. That goes back to Abraham and Sara went there when there was famine, also Joseph, the one of the coat of many colors, he went there as well. This time it is Joseph, the father of Jesus, who plays in this passage a surprisingly major role. His role as parent and guardian and protector of his family is left out of our theology because so much emphasis is placed on Mary and her role. Let’s hear it for the men!

So Joseph obeys and takes the family to Egypt. Well, it is here that we read that Herod is furious because he was deceived by the wise men, by the kings. They returned home without notifying him of the where the baby was that he wanted to kill, I mean worship. A similar reaction of being furious because someone got out without our wanting him to can be attributed to the whole Edward Snowden escapade. Really fascinating story, it has kept me enthralled. Except, big difference is how our government reacted to that episode as opposed to how Herod reacted.

We find the slaughter of the innocents takes place, every child under the age of 2 is butchered. Just hard to imagine what that would have been like. Not long ago we had our Newtown Square, this Christmas season we had a local 2 month old killed. At Paul Lefever’s funeral yesterday it came to our attention that the family needed one of our baby knit caps for the baby and our PW were more than willing to volunteer two of ours just so that they could choose the color that they wanted. You didn’t know that First Presbyterian was involved even with that tragic situation.

Jesus’ life was spared after Christmas because his father was able to hear God’s voice in a most hectic time in his life and lead him to safety. We don’t know what God’s plan for any of us is after Christmas. It could be a peaceful sleeping in a little later, then leisurely getting the coffee and sitting around the fire sharing good memories. It could be an angels voice telling you to move and move now because the life as you know it will never be the same. Probably for most of us it is somewhere in between those two realities.

In three different instances here in Matthew he quotes Scripture as being fulfilled when Jesus and his family obeyed the voice of God. Isaiah is a book in the Bible that is filled with Scriptures that were fulfilled on that first Christmas. Christmas is Christmas because Isaiah said that it was going to be, remember Emmanuel. Isaiah tells us to remember, especially remember the joy. Verse 7 recount the gracious deeds, praiseworthy acts, all that the Lord has done, great favor to our house, great mercy, abundance of his steadfast love. He became their Savior, His presence saved them, his love redeemed them. Those are the words we just read in Isaiah.

I fully recognize that some may have a hard time seeing the joy this Christmas season. But Isaiah reminds us if only the presence of the Lord is enough for salvation, then the memories of his presence is a good place to start and they should be able to sustain us. For the Holy Family that time after Christmas it was a bit hectic, but they were able to follow God’s command even in the midst of the mess.

What has it been like around here at First Presbyterian after Christmas? Well, every year at the end of the year this church zeroes out its accounts to an operating balance. Last year we didn’t think we would be able to meet our mission obligations, and we were just about $15,000 short, or so we thought, until a last minute donation came in for exactly that amount, without even knowing that we were short that amount. What a difference a year can make. This year, listen to me carefully now, we were able to double the amount that we gave to each of our mission projects from what we gave last year. As a result we ended up giving well over $100,000 in mission money which reflects more than 25% of our budgeted income.

We were not shooting for that happen. It just happened. Here are some examples, we were able to send $5,000 to the Garner family so that they can leave this month to go to their field. They weren’t able to leave until they had met their goal. We took them over the edge with that. I called Andrew to let him know and he was so overwhelmed that I think he hung up on me. I have to call him back to make sure he knows we were serious. We were able to send $11,000 to Water Street Rescue. We were able to send $4,800 to the Powerhouse and its ministry. We were able to send another $4,500 to the Lancaster Council of Churches. The list goes on. It literally took my breath away.

This does not include any of our giving that took place because of tragedies that we helped support for the Philippines, the tornadoes, and other events. We were able to take page out of Isaiah and allow what we do after Christmas to be guided by that memory of all that God has been able to do for us and so we respond in generosity and gratitude. That’s what happens after Christmas around here.

We have always been a very generous congregation, but this year for the first time in a long time, we have been able to manifest it by giving more than 25% of our budget. That is a big deal. I know some will ask how is that possible? We can come up with reasons for why it happened and how it happened but it doesn’t explain it all away. When we try to come up with human excuses for God’s work it will always sound a bit weak and hollow. We have to allow God to have the glory and celebrate the fact that he allows us to be partners with him in his work.

So, what happens after Christmas in this Gospel is shocking, but should not move us from having a foot squarely planted in the incarnation, on Christmas, while likewise as we will see what happens before Easter is equally shocking and appalling, but it should not move us away from having our other foot grounded in the resurrection.

So what happens after Christmas? We look forward to Easter while remembering all that God has done for us to give us life. I can’t wait to see what he is going to next. Amen.