

WHY CAN'T I HAVE THE TRAIN?

4th and Final in a Series for Christmas
Matthew 2:13-23

There's something I don't understand. You're going to go to a ball game and so you get a ticket for the game. On the ticket is your seat number. But when you go to the stadium the place where your seats are is called a grandstand. So the place where the fans sit is called a grandstand. Does that make any sense at all? Why isn't it called the grand sit? Of course these days apparently some people have taken that term literally. It has become a thing for people at many important games to stand for the whole game. So they pay for a seat; then they don't use it. I wonder if they've failed to grasp that when a game is sold out and they say there is standing room only that doesn't mean everyone has to stand.

That's far from the only curious thing that I don't understand. Why is a hamburger called that when there's no ham in it? Then there's eggplant, that doesn't involve any eggs. And have you ever thought about pineapple? There's neither pine nor apple involved! I don't understand these things.

There are many other things I don't understand that are on a much higher plane. Quantum mechanics, for instance, tells us there is a strange thing where two particles can be entangled so that even though they are separated by considerable distance an action on one somehow affects the other. I don't understand this, which is all right because Albert Einstein didn't either. It bothered him and he called it "spooky action at a distance."

We experience life in 3 dimensions. But many physicists believe that there are actually as many as 11 dimensions. One evidence some cite for the existence of other dimensions is something called quantum tunneling. This is when a particle seems to disappear, but then magically reappear in a completely different place. The suspicion is that the particle traveled through a dimension that we 3D people cannot perceive to arrive at that different place.

If you try to unravel things like that for very long your head will start to hurt. There are a lot of things in this universe that we simply don't understand. The fact is, we don't even actually understand common water. In a number of ways it actually behaves in weird ways that no one really understands but they are crucial for life on this planet. There are many things that will happen in our lives that we will not understand as well. So how are we to deal with them? We will get a bit of help by looking at Matthew 2:13-23.

JESUS CAME INTO A VIOLENT WORLD

The villain in this story is Herod. This was the man we now call Herod the Great, the first of several rulers called Herod in the Bible. He was designated the “King of the Jews” by the Romans and ruled as such for 40 years until shortly after the birth of Jesus. One problem with his title was that Herod wasn’t actually Jewish.

Herod was actually Idumean, coming from a people group that lived just to the east of Israel. Earlier in history that group had been called Edom. They were periodically enemies of Israel. They were descendants of Esau, which meant that Herod wasn’t Jewish at all. The Romans weren’t all that concerned about what they considered fine points such as the Jews tracing their ancestry through Isaac, not Esau. While the Jewish people were ruled by Herod they mostly despised him.

He was pretty much a despicable guy. For him the ultimate good was that Herod have power. That was all that mattered. He never submitted himself to the God of Israel. He lived only for himself and for power. A truth we should never forget is that when a person lives only for himself and refuses to submit to God, there is no limit to the horror he can inflict on others. Herod became paranoid, certain that others were plotting against him, so he opted to kill anyone he even suspected might have thoughts of ousting him, including a brother in law, a wife, two of his own sons and countless others.

Herod fit right in with a long line of powerful and evil tyrants like Josef Stalin, Adolph Hitler, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot, Saddam Hussein, Kim Il Sung, Bashar al-Assad and so many others. When he learned that an infant was born in Bethlehem that was to be the true King of the Jews, he freaked out. Never mind that he was an old man nearing the end of his life and that by the time that baby grew up Herod would be long gone. He had to end the threat that baby represented. He knew the Jews hated him and wanted no part of him. What if they rallied around this baby and fomented an uprising against him?

So Herod responded the way tyrants usually do. The answer was violence. Kill the baby and end the threat. But when Herod learned that the Magi had tricked him and left the country without telling him where the child was, he brought out plan B. If he couldn’t kill the one child in Bethlehem that he thought posed a threat, then he’d just kill all the young boys in the town. He sent troops to Bethlehem where they slaughtered every boy under the age of 2.

This is a part of the Christmas story nobody reads at the Christmas Eve service. You will see Christmas cards with Mary and Joseph on them, with angels, with shepherds, with wise men riding on camels, with the animals around the manger. You will never see a Christmas card with soldiers wielding their swords to slaughter innocent children. The story is both horrifying and heartbreaking. It is not difficult to imagine the terror and then the devastating grief of the parents who saw their precious children murdered. I suspect there were some who never got over that terrible experience.

The story of the baby born in Bethlehem was no fairy tale. Part of the story is as grievous and as horrifying as anything we have ever heard. I suppose one could note how many witches, ogres, evil people, terrible spells and violence many fairy tales contain and conclude that the story of the birth of Jesus had that in common with them. Scholars who study them say that fairy tales so often have evil and violence in them because they are intended to teach us about the reality of life. Evil is here and it is horrifying and dangerous. This is the world Jesus came into.

Still to this day one of our culture's favorite songs is *What A Wonderful World*. The lyrics say, "I see trees of green, red roses too, I see them bloom, for me and you, and I think to myself, what a wonderful world." Yes, all that is wonderful. But this is also the world where innocent children are killed and it is still happening today. It is a world awash in war, conflict, ethnic cleansing, racism, murder, atrocities and violence. We have all had a taste of this dark side of this world. When we were young we experienced the cruelty of children and in our teen years we went through the stress and hurtful disappointment that is rampant in those years. As adults we have had numerous pains inflicted on us, sometimes by people who are closest to us. We have not experienced anything like the horror of Bethlehem, but it is no surprise to us that Bethlehem happened. It is the way of our world.

Jesus knew what he was getting into. He came willingly to a world aflame and he knew he was going to be subject to all of its horrors. He was only barely saved from the worst of it before he was 2 years old.

THERE IS A WAR ON

The Bible says God rules over this earth. 2 Chronicles 20:6 says, "Lord, the God of our ancestors, are you not the God who is in heaven? You are over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you." Psalm 24:1 says, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the

world and all who live in it.” But how can this be? The Bible says God is good, loving, wise, kind and merciful. If he rules in this world why is it not also good, loving, wise, kind and merciful? How can it be a place where evil men slaughter innocent children, a place of so much violence and pain?

There is a truth most Christians know, but we easily lose sight of. It is that this earth is a battleground. There is a war going on here. It is a spiritual war. Ephesians 6:12 says, “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” This world is dark because there are forces at work here that are opposed to God, meaning opposed to what is good and loving.

In the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy J. R. R. Tolkien painted a world he called middle earth where there was a battle being waged between good and evil. At times it was open warfare and at times it was going on almost under cover, in the background, but it was always there. Lurking in the dark lands was a sinister power called Sauron, who lusted for ever more power and rule. Everywhere his rule went there was misery and death, the land became a dark, smoky, polluted wasteland. Tolkien was just telling a story to entertain his grandchildren, but it was not merely a fantastic, pointless fairy tale. It said something. It was intended to give us a picture of this world in which there is a sinister force at work. It is a force that destroys, that brings death, darkness and pollution wherever it exerts its influence.

Oh, come on, Rick. Surely you can't believe in evil spirits and dark spiritual forces at work in this world. Here is something Scott Simon, a journalist for NPR, wrote in April of this year. He says he was of a generation taught to believe that evil “was a cartoonish moral concept.” In other words, it's not real. But recently with his daughters he watched news coverage of the chemical weapons attack in Syria, that killed many children along with adults. One of his daughters asked why would anyone do something so horrible. He wrote, “I still avoid saying ‘evil’ as a reporter. But as a parent I've grown to feel it may be important to tell children about evil, as we struggle to explain cruel and incomprehensible behavior they may see not just in history, but in our own times.” He told of interviewing Romeo Dallaire who commanded UN peacekeepers in Rwanda after the massacres that occurred there. He said what he saw there convinced him that evil is real and that the devil is also quite real. He said, “I've negotiated with him, shaken his hand...there is no doubt in my mind.”

Writer John Eldredge is correct when he said that we know that any step we take in the direction of knowing and obeying God will always be opposed in this world. That's because there is a force at work that is militantly opposed to good and to God. Have you ever wondered why it is that peer pressure always seems to encourage that which is bad? It has to do with the forces of evil so active in our world.

How do those spiritual forces interact and interface with people and physical circumstances? We don't know exactly how that works. What we do know is that those spiritual forces do have effects in the physical world. The slaughter of the children of Bethlehem is an example. In 1 Thessalonians 2:18 Paul told the Thessalonians "We wanted to come to you, certainly, I, Paul, did, again and again, but Satan blocked our way." Paul wanted to go back to Thessalonica and help the brand new believers there on multiple occasions, but every time Satan blocked him. How did he do that? People got in the way. People were the problem, people who wanted to kill Paul and shut up his message. Paul says that while people were the immediate problem, Satan was behind the whole thing. The spiritual war was having tangible impact in the physical world.

Really, some invisible forces having an effect on people and events in the world? That's rather hard to swallow. Perhaps, but you believe in such things all the time. For instance, do you believe in gravity? Of course. Have you ever seen it? Have you touched it? Can you hear it? Exactly what is it? We don't really know what it is, and we certainly cannot see it or hear it. We can't smell it either. But it impacts our lives every moment of every day. There has never been even a fraction of a second of your life when you have not been seriously affected by gravity. And you believe that with all your heart. It impacts how you behave.

The same is true of the spiritual war. You can't see it or hear it, but it is going on and it is affecting you every minute of every day of your life. War is an ugly thing. Where war happens people get wounded and die. And that is happening in our world. When we wonder why things seem to go wrong, when life seems to be so perverse, when Murphy and his law seem ever present, look beyond the visible. Remind yourself that you live in a combat zone and you are under attack.

If you want a picture of it go on line and look at the beach landing scene from the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. It is horrifying, terrifying and excruciating to watch. But you should imagine that is what our circumstances of life are like. Would you go blithely walking down that beach with all that carnage going on? That is what is

happening every single day of our lives all around us. There's a war on, and that terrible massacre of innocent children in Bethlehem is one more example of it.

GOD REALLY IS MYSTIFYING

In Isaiah 55:8-9 God tells us, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Deuteronomy 29:29 says, "The secret things belong to the Lord." Romans 11:34 says, "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"

The implication is that no one knows the mind of God. His ways are not our ways and we often don't understand what he is doing. The events of Bethlehem are an example. Who would ever have thought of God coming into this world as a baby born to a virgin? That's not a human plan. But these events mystify us in another way. There is an obvious question that it raises. The passage tells us the Lord sent an angel to warn Joseph and Mary about the coming massacre. He urged them to get out of town, thus saving the life of the infant Messiah. So the obvious question is why didn't he warn the parents of the other children? He could have saved them all, not just one. Why didn't he? Did he not care about those other boys and their parents?

There is no simple answer to that question. In fact, the only answer we have is we don't know. Whenever we start a question "why did God..." or "why doesn't God..." ultimately the answer is "I don't know." We don't know the mind of God. We cannot possibly understand why he does what he does, which is why the things he does often seem mysterious or incomprehensible. It is because to finite humans they in fact are incomprehensible.

The "why did God" question could be asked infinitely. Every time a child dies we could ask that question. Every time a life is cut short and someone dies unexpectedly or way too early we could ask it. Every time there is a tragic natural disaster, when thousands of lives are lost in tornadoes, earthquakes, tsunamis or tornadoes we wonder why? Why doesn't God act to protect us?

Last year around this time Laurie and I gave to Toby, Anna and Ella a gift that was super cute. It is a Disney Christmas electric train, that has Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Minnie and Daisy, Goofy and the rest of the crew on it. Ella was only a year old and couldn't appreciate it so they left it in the boxes and kept it in the garage. As Christmas rolled around this year and Ella turned 2 years old they felt it was

time to break out the Christmas train. Ella's reaction was priceless. As soon she saw the boxes her eyes got big and she said, "Wow!" They put the train up around the Christmas tree and she was enraptured by it. They took it down the next day. Poor Ella put on her sad face and cried. Why would her parents be so unkind as to keep it from her? It was incomprehensible to her. Are they just cruel people? From her perspective that's the only possible explanation. There is another explanation. It was that she quickly began to set about destroying that train. She doesn't understand that there are certain ways of playing with it that will break it and ruin it. She doesn't know that if you pick up one of the cars and throw it you will destroy the train and won't get to enjoy it anymore. The only way they could make sure that she would get to enjoy the train in the future is to take it away. But their ways are higher than her ways and she can't understand such a mystifying and obviously unkind action.

And that's exactly our situation with God. There is an infinitely greater chasm between our understanding and God's than there is between Ella's understanding and that of her parents. Ella can only learn to know that her parents would never do anything to cause her pain willingly, but in every single thing they do seek to love her and bring about good for her. She cannot always see how it works, but she can know that they love her and learn to trust that. And that is exactly what we must do with God. Every single thing he does is to seek our good and love us. We cannot always understand how that works. Often from where we sit it might look downright cruel, but we can always trust his love.

THERE IS REASON TO TRUST HIS LOVE

Jesus' family was warned, they escaped Bethlehem and left for, of all places, Egypt. They stayed there until Herod died. Only then did they move back to Judea. When they learned that a son of Herod was ruling in Judea they decided to give that a pass and moved back to Nazareth in Galilee. So the baby Jesus was saved.

Here's where we need to remember what happened with that baby. Out of all the boys in Nazareth only one wasn't killed...yet. Why did God save that boy? So that he could die. Three decades later he would be put on a cross by the Romans even though he was the most innocent person who has ever lived on this planet.

In John 12:23-24 just before his arrest and execution Jesus said, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." Do you get what he was saying? He was saying it was his

moment for his greatest accomplishment. But that accomplishment was to die! How terrible. He knew what was about to happen. It was an awful fate to face. In verse 27 he said, "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? Father save me from this hour? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour."

We ask why would God save his own Son from the horror of Bethlehem and not the other baby boys? The answer is, he didn't. Yes, he rescued Jesus from that massacre, but it was only so that he could die. And he died so that we might all live. We all know that to receive something great you must deserve it. The best thing in all creation is to be accepted and loved by God and to know that we need not fear death because we will defeat it and live eternally. Nothing compares with that. But the problem is we don't deserve it. None of us do. We all fall short because the standard for having that is the glory, the goodness, the holiness of God. And we don't get close. Every religion and philosophy in the world operates on the premise that we need to find the right formula for gaining that best of all goods. They all have different formulas but they all share one thing in common. They don't work. We can't do it. No matter what the formula we can't live by it. Only one way of life is different. It is the one provided by God. The one that comes through Jesus, who was born, who was kept safe until the right time so he could do the very most important thing he was here to do, and that was to die for us.

We get caught up in thinking if God really loved us life would go better for us. We have all these things we want and if we don't get them we think surely it is evidence that God is either not there or if he is he does not love us. The most important thing we can keep always in the forefront of our minds and hearts is Romans 5:8. "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were sinners, Christ died for us." God proved his love by sending his beloved Son into a combat zone, a place of darkness, war and death, with the specific goal of dying so that we all might have life. Nothing else that happens to us will ever compare.

Yes, there will be disappointments along the way that puzzle us. But you might want to think back on your life. Do you remember your years in high school? There were things that seemed all consuming in those years. Parents were kind of embarrassing and just didn't get it. Your friends were all important. There were so many things of enormous importance. Who would get invited to prom by whom? Who would get the starting position on the team? Who would get the lead parts in the play? Who would be on the homecoming court, and who would be homecoming queen? Life was so emotional and so ruled by such momentous events. For most of us there were some disappointments that seemed terribly

painful. A few years later you look back on it and just shake your head. Quite likely those all-important friends are mostly forgotten. The whole thing about prom and homecoming seem so immature and unimportant. Those disappointments you now realize just didn't matter all that much. You feel kind of embarrassed about the fact that you wasted so much emotional energy on all those things that now couldn't be less important to you.

Even now we have things in our lives that have replaced that teen aged drama and they seem so crucially important to us. But a time will come when in the presence of God it will all look pretty much like high school to us. We will see how little it all mattered.

CONCLUSION

So what should we do in light of all this? We must do 2 things:

1. In the midst of all the confusion of this world, ***never doubt God's love***. He loves you enough to go to the extreme of the cross. No matter what else happens nothing can take away that proof of unconditional, perfect love. Writer Brennan Manning's real given name was Richard Xavier Francis Manning. His best friend was a man named Ray Brennan. They bought a car together and shared it, they went on double dates together, and then ended up in the army together, fighting in Korea. Manning says that one night he and Ray were in a foxhole during a lull in the fighting and were reminiscing about old times. Ray was eating a chocolate bar. Suddenly a live grenade landed in their foxhole. Ray smiled, dropped his candy bar and fell on the grenade. His body absorbed the blast, killing him but saving Manning's life. When he got out of the army Manning visited Ray's mother. Manning was deeply discouraged, feeling bad about himself, thinking no one could really love him. He said to Ray's mom, "Do you think Ray really loved me?" Angrily she got up, pointed her finger at Manning and said, "What more could he have done for you?" He knew instantly she was right. He gave up his life to love Manning. So Manning later changed his name to Brennan to honor his friend.

There is no greater way to prove love than what Jesus did for us. We must always remember that God has proven his love beyond any doubt. Our problem is we think we want God to prove his love by giving us things we want. But when is that ever enough? The first time he doesn't give you what

you want you will question his love. And there will be those times. I got an unpleasant cold this week. I asked God to make me better in time for Sunday so it wouldn't get in the way of church. Hey, a cold is going to last for a few days, so why not have it end a couple of days sooner so that I can do what God has given me to do? What that somehow ruin God's eternal plan for history or even for my life? And yet it didn't happen. So what do I do in response?

2. ***Trust in his love.*** There will be times for all of us when God's ways are way above our ways. His plan in our lives will be a total mystery. He won't do what we would do and what we want him to do. There will be times when he seems to take the train we want so badly away from us for no good reason whatsoever. But we can trust that everything he is doing is driven by his perfect love for us.