

The Absurdity of Kneeling Before a Helpless Child

Matthew 2:13-23

1st Sunday After Christmas

December 30, 2007

by Dr. Frank Trotter

When my radio alarm clock came on early this past Thursday morning, December 27th, and the words of the newscaster on National Public Radio began to filter into the fogginess of my awareness, I found myself jolted when the news of the outside world pulled me into wakefulness more quickly than I would have wished.

On this occasion the news was about the assassination of former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto at the close of a political rally leading up to next month's previously scheduled national elections. Because of its strategic proximity to both Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as to Al Qaeda and the Taliban, Pakistan has been an important ally of the United States and other world leaders. But with Bhutto's assassination, the world community is again forced to taking a hard look at the codependent relationship between power and responsibility.

When Washington placed all of its hopes in the hands of Pakistan's president, Pervez Musharraf, several years ago, critics asked if there was a Plan B. When it became apparent in recent months that the Musharraf government is more fragile than believed, Washington brokered a deal between Musharraf and Bhutto where she would return from exile in an effort to support democracy in Pakistan.

Of course, Bhutto brought baggage of her own. In an editorial this past Friday, the *New York Times* described her as "a flawed and undeniably courageous leader."¹ Serious charges of corruption have swirled around her leadership for years including the possibility that she ordered the assassination of her own brother during the 1990's.

The editorial in the *Times* went on to say: "The United States cannot afford to have Pakistan unravel any further. The lesson of the last six years is that authoritarian leaders — even ones backed with billions in American aid —

¹ Editorial, "After Benazir Bhutto," *New York Times*, Friday, December 28, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/28/opinion/28fri1.html?_r=1&oref=slogin.

don't make reliable allies, and they can't guarantee security... The days of Washington mortgaging its interests there to one or two individuals must finally come to an end."²

Early this morning Ms. Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party named her 19-year-old son, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, a law student at Oxford, as the chairman of the party and her late husband, Asif Ali Zardari, as the co-chairman.³ Whether maintaining direct ties to Bhutto's family legacy of leadership will do anything to move things to a more positive place in this troubled nation remains to be seen.

People have woken up to disturbing news, of course, in every time and generation. The passage we have just heard from the Gospel of Matthew comes from another tumultuous time two thousand years ago. It's a familiar story for us: wise men from the East who have followed a strange star come to Jerusalem seeking a child who is born king of the Jews; a frightened King Herod asks them to search for the child in his name that he might worship him as well; the wise men do indeed find the child and pay him homage; but warning in a dream, they return home by another road.

Today's passage picks up at the point where Herod, unable to control his fear and anxiety, orders his soldiers into the Bethlehem area to kill all children under two years of age. Before the troops arrive, an angel warns Joseph to get up immediately in the middle of the night and flee with Mary and the child to Egypt. Within time, King Herod dies. But when Joseph and Mary bring the child back to Judea they discover that Herod's son, Archelaus, is in power and may be just as dangerous. So they move to the town of Nazareth in Galilee hoping to find a safe place to live.

Biblical scholar Eugene Boring summarizes the crisis this way: "A king is born, but a king is already there; and there is room for only one king. The birth of Jesus, the messianic king, precipitates a conflict with the kingship already present in this world. The conflict drives Jesus from his native Judea to exile in 'Galilee of the Gentiles.'"⁴

² Ibid.

³ Reuters, "Bhutto's Son and Husband Appointed Party Leaders," *New York Times*, Sunday, December 30, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/world/wire-pakistan.html?_r=1&oref=slogin.

⁴ M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 139. Dr. Boring is Professor of New Testament at the Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas.

We know this story, don't we? It's the ancient tale of invested power, the tale of fear and paranoia that spills over when unexpected word comes that a new power is coming.

There has been great debate over the years among biblical scholars about whether or not the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem actually occurred. While there is no independent historical account to support the story's authenticity (other than Matthew), the story is, according to Dr. Boring, "in character with the historical Herod the Great, who was ruthless in maintaining his grasp on power."⁵

Erich Fried, an Austrian poet who was born in 1921 and died in 1988, knew what it was to fear the authorities on behalf of one's very life. After his father was killed by the Nazis, he fled with his mother to London to live in safety.⁶ In his poem, "The Measures Taken"⁷, one can sense how his life's journey shaped his artistic musings:

The lazy are slaughtered
the world grows industrious

The ugly are slaughtered
the world grows beautiful

The foolish are slaughtered
the world grows wise

The sick are slaughtered
the world grows healthy

The sad are slaughtered
the world grows merry

The old are slaughtered
the world grows young

The enemies are slaughtered
the world grows friendly

The wicked are slaughtered

⁵ Ibid., 146.

⁶ "Erich Fried," Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erich_Fried.

⁷ Erich Fried, "The Measures Taken," translated from the German by Michael Hamburger, included in the collection *Poems to Live By in Troubling Times*, edited by Joan Murray (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 19-20.

the world grows good.

Fried's poem is filled with irony. We know that the world does not grow younger when the old are slaughtered. We know that wisdom does not come when the foolish are killed, or that beauty does not miraculously appear when ugliness is banished. And despite the efforts of military regimes in every nation and every time, we know that slaughtering those whom are perceived as wicked does not automatically lead to the advent of goodness.

We live in a world where there is always a rationalization for slaughtering, or the psychological or political elimination of anyone who stands in our way, or with whom we strongly disagree. When people of faith come to places of worship on mornings like this hoping for a divine word, it often feels foolish – what theologian William Loader calls the absurdity of “kneeling before a helpless child.”⁸

William Willimon, one of our United Methodist bishops, preached a sermon on this text ten years ago when he was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. He says, “At the end of the story of the Nativity, after the angels, shepherds, wise men, and the baby Jesus, we hear the screams of mothers, weeping for Jewish babies, our nose gets rubbed in politics and pain, blood and sorrow before leaving Bethlehem. And even though it's not the Christmas story we want, it may be the Christmas story we need. For any God who is unwilling to come to Bethlehem, won't do us much good. If any God is going to save us, us, God will have to come to where we are, because we can't get to God.”⁹

I don't know about you, but on mornings when I wake up to the sadness of what life can be like, I need to believe that meaning can indeed still be found in absurd, defiant actions – that kneeling is, itself, an affirmation, a confessional statement by the people of faith that God has not abandoned us. Indeed, affirm this good day that God continues to come to us where we are.

In the year ahead of us, it is my prayer that this church, this congregation becomes a place where stories are shared about what can be done in God's

⁸ William Loader, “First Thoughts on Year A Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Christmas 1,” <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtChristmas1.htm>. Mr. Loader is a member of the faculty at Murdoch University, Uniting Church in Australia, in Perth.

⁹ William Willimon, “Blood in Bethlehem,” Sermon Archive, Duke Chapel, December 27, 1998, <http://www.chapel.duke.edu/worship/sunday/viewsermon.aspx?id=64>. Bishop Willimon now serves as the Episcopal leader of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church.

name by brave souls in the midst of an absurd world. I want to hear the stories of how you are surviving – and how you are working to enable others to survive and thrive. And I want to hear the prayers you offer to God as I hope you will be led to hear mine.

For us, it all begins by kneeling in adoration and humility before a helpless child.

Thanks be to God. Amen.