

While in seminary, my husband and I, along with 12 others from our seminary, went to Turkey for three weeks as part of our January term class. We were there to travel in the footsteps of Paul, see the history of the ancient Christians, see the hubs from where Christianity took root and spread, but we were also there to see the cave churches and the underground cities that the Christians had to build and had to hide in as they were being persecuted. Within those three weeks we saw thousands of years of history right before our eyes – huge Byzantine churches that were built on the ruins of Greek temples that were later converted into Mosques when the Turks arrived, and how they stand now as museums honoring their Christian heritage and their Islamic heritage – and it is one such church, turned Mosque, turned museum, that I would like to tell you about today. It was called the Cora Church because it was the church out in the country, outside the city walls of Istanbul. “Cora” means something like “country.”

When the church was built all of its walls were covered with mosaics depicting three different stories: The birth, childhood, and life of Mary; the birth, the life, and the teachings of Jesus; and the spread of early Christianity through the disciples and Paul; however, when the Turks came in and conquered Constantinople and renamed it Istanbul and they turned Turkey into an Islamic state, and all of the churches were converted into mosques; and the Turks, instead of destroying these beautiful mosaics just hid them behind plaster.

Around 65 years ago when Turkey declared itself to no longer be an Islamic state but a secular state, worship ceased in these church/mosques and the plaster hiding the mosaics came down and the buildings were open to the public as museums. When we went to this church I was in deep awe of the mosaics that we saw, by not only the artistry, the shading and the coloration of the scenes, but also by the wonderful pictorial story of Jesus that served as a Bible so many years ago.

I remember getting to the scene of Jesus’ birth. It took up a whole wall on its own, and it was absolutely mesmerizing – it was a scene that encapsulated the whole of that night in Bethlehem – and it even seemed to be giving off its own radiant light. But then we stepped into the next room and I was confronted with images that will never leave my memory – they were images of this passage – they were images of babies being slaughtered. And in the corner of the mosaic was a woman – Rachel, who was weeping and wailing, unable to be consoled. These two images right next to each other, flowing one into the other – the radiance and peacefulness of the manger next to the horrific and disturbing scene of sand running red with the blood of the innocent. It was a juxtaposition unlike any other that I have never experienced, and I found myself getting a little angry that this story made it into the Bible – the senselessness, the pain, the loss of innocence, and all for what?

This story that we are immersed in today is the reality of the human condition. This is the ugliness of humanity, this is the cruelty that humanity can possess, this is injustice and fear that lurks in the heart of humanity – and this is why God sent Jesus to humanity. The manger scene, with its glowing radiance, its air of peace, is not a representation of humanity – *that* humanity wouldn’t need Jesus “he saves” – wouldn’t need Emmanuel “God with us” – but the fear that overwhelms and drives Herod to the point of murderous obsession, *that* is the humanity that Jesus broke into, that is the humanity that needs Jesus “he saves,” that needs Emmanuel “God with us,” that is our humanity, that is us.

Now, we don't act as Herod did, though there are those in our world that do, that we read about and hear about in the news – there is still evil in our world, there are still Herods in our world; and though we might not act like Herod, letting our fear, our envy, our self-doubt, our self-obsession engulf our whole beings to the point that we would destroy any semblance of a threat to us; even if we don't act the way Herod did, we still have some Herod in us, we still have the fears, the envy, the self-doubt, the self-obsession in us that prompted Herod to do what he did.

We still let the fears of rejection or of not fitting in keep us from boldly proclaiming our faith to one another. We still let envy invade our lives as we compare our lives, our possessions, our importance to others. We still let self-doubt creep into our hearts and minds as we wonder if we are doing enough, if we are good enough, if we are even worth loving. We are still self-obsessed enough that we think of our own wants before others' needs. We think of ourselves before our neighbor, we think of ourselves before we think of those we share a pew with. How many of us know the fears and the dreams of the people that we are sitting in the pew with today? Or even in this neighborhood? How many of us know their faith story, what brings them back here week after week? How many of us know their names in here and out there?

We aren't Herod, but we sure share a lot in common with him and so we too need Jesus to break into our lives and save us. As our text in Hebrews indicates that it was fitting that God should make the pioneer of our salvation like us, taking on flesh like ours, so that we are all of one Father and Jesus can call us brothers and sisters – and as his brothers and sisters, you and I are on equal ground with whom he came to save – we are the ones whom he came to save. It is through Jesus' suffering and death that the trail to eternal salvation has been blazed for us. We do not have to be ruled by fear, envy, self-doubt, or self-obsession, and we do not have to fear death, because Jesus has conquered the power of death on our behalf. God loves you so much that he sent Jesus into this world, this humanity, taking on our flesh so that we too may be like him. He came not to help the angels, but to save us.

And so, as we now celebrate the Twelve Days of Christmas, and even though our gospel today confronts us with the death of innocent children at the hands of Herod, we can take heart that even though the birth of Christ does not remove the power of evil from our world fully yet, the birth of Christ is a light that gives us hope as we walk in solidarity with all the "holy innocents" of past generations and also with those today who have suffered unjustly. As we are gathering at the table, as we hear the word proclaimed, and as we sit in this body of Christ, this Christian community, God continues to redeem us, lift us up, and carry us as in days of old. God came to bring light into our dark world, the manger scene with its glowing radiance came directly into and for our human condition.

Jesus came to cleanse you from your sin, and the Holy Spirit came to redeem you, uplift you, and send you out, to take the plaster off our stories, the good and the bad, and display in and through us the story of God's transforming love.

And so, leave here today confidently knowing that you are cleansed, you are redeemed, you are loved, even in your darkest days – for God sent Jesus into this world not to help the angels but to redeem you – Jesus' brothers and sisters.