

By Gracious Powers Wonderfully Sheltered

Sermon for December 29, 2019
First Sunday after Christmas
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*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

Grace to you and peace from the one who is and the one who was and the one who is to come.

Gloria! Gloria! Gloria! Gloria in excelsis deo!

This is what we sang in this worship space just five days ago!

Glory to God in the highest! Gloria in excelsis deo!

The choir joined the congregation, and brought an extra layer of beauty to our song; a soaring soprano wove golden threads through the air.

Gloria! Gloria! Gloria! We sang in imitation of the angels! Together we filled this entire worship space with heavenly sound. If you close your eyes, you might still hear an echo of our beautiful song.

But now, listen: Can you hear it? A new voice - a sharp and piercing voice, a howling voice - is this even human? Or is it an animal crying like that? And listen, now there is another voice! And now another! And now, can you hear? More and more and more voices! A whole choir! But what a choir! A terrible choir, a choir of lament and distress, rising up from unspeakable grief and pain.

*Oh God! No! Oh, God! My son! My baby! My darling! My sunshine, My Life!
Oh God, what have they done? Oh God! Oh God!*

Who is crying like this? It is the parents of the innocent children who were slaughtered by King Herod. Killed right in front of their eyes! Their blood spilled everywhere! Blood running down the streets like rivers. A senseless act of violence, ordered by a mad and power-hungry king. The parents

cry and groan, they refuse to be consoled.

And now, listen. Can you hear it? More voices crying, more and more. Now we hear the voices of our own time. Families in conflict zones, families whose children have become the victims of senseless wars.

I looked up where the most casualties are happening right now. Right now, the conflicts with the highest casualties are: the Syrian Civil War, the civil war in South Sudan, the war in Afghanistan, and the Mexican Drug War. Then there is Yemen, Somalia, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. These are the places where parents right now are crying over their slaughtered children.

And now: even more voices! Listen! Can you hear them? Parents of every time and age, all the way back to Adam and Eve: Adam and Eve, whose son was killed his own brother. A murder so terrible, that the blood itself cried from the ground.

Parents from every time and age, throughout history are crying. So much violence, so much bloodshed, so many, many senseless deaths! When will it ever end?

And yet, above all, and even in the midst of all, the choir of the angels continues. The *Gloria in excelsis deo* continues!

There is an epic battle between the voices of praise and the voices of lament. The voices of praise cannot drown out the voices of lament, and the voices of lament cannot silence the voices of praise. The different voices arise from the cosmic battle between good and evil, a battle fought every day on our earth, on our human bodies, on the bodies of our children. Every day we are caught in the cross-hairs of this cosmic battle.

And what can we do, we who are caught in these cross-hairs? Our human instinct is fight or flight. According to our temperament and nature, we might fight or we might flee. We might become activists and fight for a better world, or we might withdraw into some private paradise and block out the world with all its troubles.

But there is a third option, an option which emerges from the gospel reading we heard today. *Flee to Egypt!*

What does that mean, to “flee to Egypt?” It means to go away for a while, but not forever. To go away with a purpose: to go deeper and regroup.

Jesus, the Prince of Peace, was born to heal our troubled world. But when the children were slaughtered, his time had not yet come. After all, he was just a tiny baby himself, and like all the other babies was in grave danger. His family took him to Egypt, out of harm's way.

And even later, when he returned to Galilee, he chose many times the path of avoidance. One time he was in his hometown of Nazareth, and he preached in the synagogue, and his townspeople took offense, and

they got up, drove him out of the town,

*and took him to the brow of the hill
on which the town was built,
in order to throw him off the cliff.
But he walked right through the
crowd and went on his way. (Luke 4:28-30)*

Many times, when Jesus found himself in a dangerous spot, he did this: he escaped and hid from his enemies. For a long time he chose flight rather than fight. Which is not to say that he did not engage his opponents in fierce arguments, or that he did not take the powerful to task for the sake of justice.

But all along he was biding his time, gathering strength, gathering power, until the time was ripe. And then he took on the entire cosmic evil by going to the cross, and then to the place beyond the cross, to the place where he conquered evil once and for all.

On the night before his death, when he was together with his disciples for the last time, he prayed for them. And this is what he prayed:

*“Father, the hour has come;
I am praying for those whom you have given me,
for they are yours.
And I am no longer in the world,
but they are in the world,
and I am coming to you.
Holy Father, keep them in your name,
which you have given me,
that they may be one, even as we are one.
While I was with them, I have guarded them.
But now I am coming to you.
I do not ask that you take them out of the world,
but that you keep them from the evil one.
I do not ask for these only,
but also for those who will believe in me through their word,
that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you,
that they also may be in us,
so that the love with which you have loved me
may be in them, and I in them.”
(Selected verses from John 17)*

These tender and moving words tell me that while we are alive on this earth, we are meant to be in the world, but not of the world. God will not spare us from the world. God will not stop the wars for us. God will not stop the violence and bloodshed and mass shootings and terror and all kinds

of terrible things. But God will protect us.

This protection comes in many forms. Sometimes God helps us by sending us to Egypt. "Fleeing to Egypt" can take many forms. Some people become refugees and migrants like Jesus and his family. Some people find hiding places in the form of inner peace - islands of sanity in the midst of a world gone mad.

All around us are "little Egypts" where we can regroup and catch our breath. All around us are little hiding places where our soul can find shelter. Even in the most difficult places, there are little sanctuaries, if only we have eyes to see.

Even in prison we can find such sheltering places, such "little Egypts". Such was the experience of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor who lived in Germany during the time of the Nazi regime. He joined the underground resistance against Adolph Hitler. He got caught and was put into a Gestapo prison. While he was in prison, the extent of the plot came to light, and he was sentenced to death. He was executed on April 9, 1945.

But already by Christmas of the previous year, it was clear that the future looked grim. And so, on New Year's Eve, as he sat in his bleak prison cell and faced a terrifying future, he wrote a poem for his family and friends - a powerful poem full of hope and trust in God. This poem was later set to music and it is now a popular hymn in Germany. The poem is called: *By Gracious Powers Wonderfully Sheltered*.

*By gracious powers wonderfully sheltered,
and confidently waiting come what may,
we know that God is with us every night and morning
and never fails to greet us each new day.*

*By gracious powers faithfully protected,
so quietly, so wonderfully near,
I'll live each day in hope, with you beside me,
and go with you through every coming year.*

These are good words to contemplate as we come to the end of the year. A new year lies before us, and we do not know what the future will bring, but we know this: each day we will live in the cross-hairs between good and evil; each day angels will sing while wars rage around us. May we, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, discover God's gracious care for us, and know ourselves "by gracious powers wonderfully sheltered."

Amen.

