

The God Who Wastes Nothing  
Matthew 2:1–12, 13–23  
Sunday, January 3, 2021

Usually on Epiphany, when we hear the story of the wise men, we stop there; they give their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and then are warned in a dream not to return to King Herod, so they go back to their own country by another road. It's kind of a nice, tidy ending to the whole Christmas story. *But*, the story *doesn't* end there. And so we are going to continue on now through verse 23, where Matthew writes...(read Matthew 2:13–23). So we have this whole *other* part of the story, where Jesus and his family become *refugees*, fleeing political persecution and death. This part of the story is often referred to as the "Slaughter of the Innocents," the killing of every child under the age of two by King Herod. And this, too, is the Word of the Lord. So what do we *do* with this?

A few months ago, Jen and I had a scare where we had been in contact with someone who *thought* they might have Covid. So we quarantined and waited for them to get their test results back, and fortunately everything came out fine. But there was a time there when we were really worried. And we were also *frustrated*.

We had been *so careful* since March – always wearing masks, good about washing our hands, keeping our circle of interaction very small. We had seen people we know on social media travelling or going out to eat or having big gatherings, and we hadn't done *any* of that. I mean, I still wear gloves when I go to the gas station! And I know I probably don't need to do that, but that's how careful we have been. And so now you're telling me there's a chance, with all these precautions we've taken, that we got it *anyway*? That was incredibly frustrating. It's like, "We've been so careful. We haven't gone anywhere or done anything. I'm going to be so mad if we have it, because we didn't even do anything *fun*!" It would be one thing if we got it on

some fun trip somewhere or from a big family gathering. But to get it when we didn't even do anything worthwhile? What did we bother being so safe for?! Were all our precautions just a waste of time and energy?

And as I read this story of the wise men, I have to imagine that there was some of this going on with them, too. They did everything that God told them to do. They didn't go back to Herod. They didn't tell him where to find the Messiah. They snuck back to their home country by a different route. They probably thought they had pulled one over on him, or at least that they had done the right thing.

And then I wonder, did they hear about what happened? It doesn't tell us if they did, but the killing of dozens, if not hundreds, of children by King Herod seems like something that word would have spread about. And if they *did* hear, the wise men would not have known that Jesus managed to *escape* that. So did they hear about this and think, "Was it all for nothing? We did everything we were supposed to do. We were so careful. And all these children – maybe even including *him* – were killed anyway. Why did we even bother? By going to see him, did we do more harm than good? Was this whole thing for *nothing*; just a waste of lives?"

I started thinking about this a couple of months ago, because I heard a lot of people talking about 2020 as a "lost year" or a "wasted year." The idea being that so many things were put on hold or not able to be done last year. People saying that, with all of the challenges of virtual schooling, it was a "lost year" or a "wasted year" for our kids in school. Vacations cancelled. Family gatherings cancelled. Workplace productivity going down because of all the people who had to figure out how to work from home. Not to mention the challenges to the life of the church; no

in-person Easter or Christmas Eve services. A lot of people just kind of write last year off as a loss, a wasted year that we'll make up for later.

But I recently came across a letter that author Kurt Vonnegut wrote to his daughter Nanette in 1971. Vonnegut had published his acclaimed book *Slaughterhouse Five* two years earlier, and in the time since, he had embraced his fame at the expense of his family. So by the time he was writing this letter to his daughter, his marriage and relationships with his children had fallen apart. In the meantime, his daughter Nanette had encountered some problems in high school, leading her to feel like she had lost a year of schooling. She expressed this in a letter to her father, and then he wrote back saying this,

“You’re dismayed at having lost a year, maybe, because the school fell apart. Well – I feel as though I’ve lost the years since *Slaughterhouse-Five* was published, but that’s malarky. Those years weren’t lost. They simply weren’t the way I’d planned them. Neither was the year in which Jim had to stay motionless in bed while he got over TB. Neither was the year in which Mark went crazy, then put himself together again. Those years were adventures. Planned years are not...I look back on my own life, and I wouldn’t change anything.”<sup>1</sup>

*They weren’t wasted years. They just didn’t go according to plans. They were adventures in a way that planned years are not.* Now, while I wouldn’t call a year in which over 300,000 people have died an *adventure*, I get what he’s saying there. This past year was not a “lost” year or a “wasted” year for us. It just didn’t go the way we had imagined or planned. But we can’t just write it off and move on like it never happened. It’s a part of our story now. We experienced things and learned things that will shape us and make us the people we are for the rest of our lives.

As a church, yes, we lost some things. But we also learned how to put together online services, which is something that we will continue doing forever now because of the way we have seen it

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/11/11/kurt-vonnegut-advice-to-children/>

keep our members who are homebound or have moved away or are gone for the summer connected to their church family.

Our kids haven't "lost" or "wasted" a year of education. They have learned how to adapt and be resilient, and that's something that you *can't* always learn in a classroom.

As we talked about in the Christmas Eve sermon, we have all learned the importance of in-person, physical presence in our relationships, how much we *need* that, that will hopefully keep us from taking that for granted ever again.

Some of us learned new skills like cooking or baking or woodworking or knitting or gardening. We read and wrote and went for walks. We *prayed*, perhaps in different ways than we ever have before. We learned how to use new technology like Zoom, and some of you remember how terrifying that seemed ten months ago.

This past year was undoubtedly hard and painful for many people, but it was not a *waste*. All of the things that we experienced – even the grief and the loss – they become a part of us and make us the people we are today, the people we will *become* tomorrow. God can use *all of it* to make us the people God created and called us to be.

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I have a frame hanging in my office with a Hebrew phrase printed on it. In Hebrew it says, "Hael semah az ez qum," *the God who wastes nothing*. Everything that happens in our lives – the *good*, the *bad*, the *joy*, the *pain*, the *successes*, the *mistakes* – God can use *all of it* to achieve God's purposes in this world and in our lives. Nothing is wasted. Nothing is "for nothing." It doesn't mean that it was all planned or predetermined or "God's will," but that God can take all

the things that happen in this world and in our lives and *use them* to do something good. It's like what Joseph says to his brothers at the end of Genesis, after they have sold him into slavery. He says, "What *you* meant for evil, *God* intended for *good*." Paul says this a different way in his letter to the Romans, he says, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose." That doesn't mean that all things *are* good, but that God can *use* even the things that are painful and bad to *do* something good.

I always equate it to taking a trip across country. You start here in Devon, and you're driving to California. You have the trip all planned out, programmed into your GPS. You start off, and everything's going fine, but then you get into Ohio, and there's construction or a detour. Or you get a flat tire. Or your car breaks down. You have to find another way. You're still going to get to your ultimate destination. There are just a lot of different ways to get there. And it might end up looking a lot different than you had planned. But those detours...they're a part of the journey.

God has an ultimate destination for us, for creation. A purpose. A big picture plan for where God wants all of this to end up. But along the way, there are mistakes and detours and pandemics and pain and suffering and all kinds of things that get us off track. Those things *aren't* a part of God's plan, but God keeps rerouting, so that eventually we will get to the goal that God has for us. And those things that we experience along the way, they shape us and affect how we go about the rest of the journey. But none of it is *wasted*, because this is a God who *wastes nothing*.

We see this in the second half of the Epiphany story with all its fear and pain and death. There are three sections here – Joseph having a dream and fleeing to Egypt, Herod killing the children,

and Joseph and his family returning – and each of the three sections ends with some version of, “This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet....” That doesn’t mean that the prophets *predicted* these things or that God made them happen, but that God *used* these events to fulfill God’s purpose, and they became a part of the story of God.

God does not let even suffering and pain and death go to waste. God *redeems* it to bring about something *greater*.

That is exactly what God does at this table. And that is exactly what God does in each of our lives. Nothing is wasted. It all becomes part of the journey that leads us to the Kingdom of God. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.