

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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November 5, 2023

All Saints, Matthew 5:1-12

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.¹ *Amen.*

The Gospel of Matthew begins with a genealogy that establishes Jesus as a son of Abraham, within the royal lineage of David.² Matthew's Jesus is born messiah-King, and the Beloved Kingdom he inaugurates will oppose the power of Empire. Despite the violence surrounding the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls and commissions ambassadors of grace and mercy, his steadfast peaceableness distinguishing the reign of God from the reign of emperors.

This March, retired U.S. Air Force Colonel Robert Certain returned to Hanoi, Vietnam, and to Hoa Lo Prison, one of the locations where the North Vietnamese held him captive for four months. This trip, made with eight other American POWs and their families, marked the fiftieth anniversary of Certain's release, and, as described in Jeremy Redmon's *Smithsonian Magazine* article published this week, the Hoa Lo site – now an office building and hotel – includes a museum “featuring a mix of original and re-created artifacts” that tell of their experience.³ During the visit “Certain spotted a historic sign bearing an aerial photo of the prison ... [and, pointing to the image, he announced,] ‘There I am.’”

Like Episcopalians in Mississippi, Tennessee, California, and across our Church, I would address Colonel Certain as “*Father* Certain,” were he to walk into Trinity today; upon his return to the States, he entered seminary and was ordained an Episcopal priest. He has served faithfully for going on a half-century now, including his current call – in “retirement” – as interim rector at Church of the Messiah in historic Gonzales, Texas [where I have it on good authority he's helped double the Average Sunday Attendance to 35]. Even so, I think of him more familiarly as “Mary's Dad.”⁴

His daughter, Mary Certain Vano, was a seminary classmate of mine, and she and I share a videoconference every Thursday morning with three others from our cohort – a weekly connection the five of us have kept for more than twenty years, and that we punctuate with annual, in-person retreats. As happens in friendships that stretch across decades, Mary's family and friends have, in their way, become characters in my own life. I have heard tales of the adventures she shared with them during her growing-up years “in the Valley” along the Texas-Mexico border; I have celebrated their births and their accomplishments; I have prayed for them during their sicknesses and their griefs.

I confess a habit of playing this game in my head where I compare the distance between a past event and now, to the same distance between that past moment and some even-further-back event. By this exercise, I realize nearly as many years have now passed since I met Mary, as were between that glad moment and Colonel Certain's release from the POW camp. Of course, 1973 is a long time ago ... and, of course, it's not; when I consider how much it feels like yesterday that Mary and I started school together, I tremble to consider how near the experience of capture must still feel to her dad.

In Matthew's Gospel, the birth of "Emmanuel ... God with us,"⁵ follows the genealogy, and the Evangelist identifies that moment as "*in the time of King Herod*" – a purposeful acknowledgement of Rome's brutality that looms over all the Gospel's events.⁶ Wise men from the East then observe Jesus' "star at its rising," and they travel to Jerusalem to pay homage to this "king of the Jews."⁷ When Herod hears this, Matthew reports the king "was frightened."⁸

In his fright, Herod "secretly called for the wise men ... [and] sent them on to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.'"⁹ The wise men find the child with his mother; open "their treasure chests;" and offer him "gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh."¹⁰ [You know the story.] However, we remember less fondly and less often that angels of the Lord then appear in dreams, warning the wise men not to return to Herod,¹¹ and warning Joseph to "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain [there;] for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."¹²

The wise men do as they are told and leave "by another road," and the holy family escapes to Egypt.¹³ "When Herod [realizes he has] been tricked," his fright *turns to fury*.¹⁴ In an episode of shocking depravity, Herod murders "all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under,"¹⁵ "Holy Innocents" the Church memorializes each year on December 28.¹⁶

With little transition, the Gospel then speeds years ahead to the appearance of John the Baptist at the edge of Judea.¹⁷ From his riverside encampment, John proclaims, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near!"¹⁸ Of course, we remember the run-of-show that follows this, as well: Jesus appears to John, John baptizes his cousin, and the Holy Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness "to be tempted by the devil."¹⁹

The devil's temptations set in further relief the Gospel's primary tension, asking Jesus to exchange the power of God, for the power of Rome.²⁰ Thankfully, Jesus overcomes those wiles, yet, while angels "[wait] on him"²¹ during his recovery from forty days of fasting, Jesus learns the Empire remains as near as his nose, for John has been arrested.²² On the other side of the Sermon on the Mount, let us remember that it is in this Gospel that one of Herod the Great's successors – his son, Herod Antipas – beheads John and presents the prophet's head on a silver platter to Herodias and her little girl during that lecherously awful dinner party.²³

Lord, have mercy.

In the constellation of my friends' friends and their families, Father Certain has held a place of high esteem with a sprinkle of magic – and, truth be told, more than a dash of admiring fear. I remember a lunch in seminary [where I was likely laboring over a fantasy baseball lineup] when Mary shared that her dad, after his release, received a “Golden Ticket” from the Commissioner of Major League Baseball. This ticket granted him free admission to any MLB game for the rest of his life, and, in the days she told the story, she reported that her dad kept the ticket in the glove compartment of his car – you know, right there next to his BCP, insurance card, and state registration – a wonderfully ordinary home for such an extraordinary token.

Last week, Mary linked that remarkable *Smithsonian* piece to our group text, prompting the comment from one of us: “I feel like I know your dad better now.” And I agreed. The narrative of the mission Colonel Certain flew startles any reader: how he felt his plane “shudder and twist slightly to the left” after the B-52 was hit by a “SAM,” a surface-to-air missile; how he realized the plane was going down and he could see the fire onboard approaching the two dozen bombs still in its hold; how he ejected and debated during his 30,000-foot descent whether it would be better to die than to face capture; how he pulled his parachute's risers to lead him away from the bombs exploding below him, landed six miles northwest of Hanoi, and radioed, “I'm on the ground, uninjured, surrounded ... Will be captured shortly.”²⁴

The article continues and recalls of the situation on the ground that “the North Vietnamese people were [also] suffering hundreds of casualties[. These included a devastation at] Bach Mai Hospital in Hanoi [which] was hit when a SAM struck a B-52 as it dropped its bombs.” Some may remember “Joan Baez, the American folk singer and activist who traveled to Hanoi as part of a peace delegation, [telling] *Rolling Stone* magazine that the hospital was ‘completely obliterated[.]’ How she] ‘saw corpses in a long row[,] and ... ‘]people racing all around carrying bleeding patients piggyback out of the debris.’

“A Hanoi neighborhood [was] also hit. The Vietnamese-American writer Mai Elliott wrote [about] that destruction in *The Sacred Willow*, [her] memoir about the history of Vietnam as told through the generations of her [family].” Elliot's cousin, Lang, operated a fabric stall in the bombed neighborhood, and she shared that “Relatives of those who had been killed [came] to buy cloth from Lang so they could ‘wrap [their loved ones’] corpses for burial. She sold so much fabric that her arms began to ache from cutting it.”²⁵

Lord, have mercy.

Fully bridging us to our All Saints Gospel appointment, “When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee ... As he walked the [seaside,] he saw [Simon Peter and Andrew] ... and said to them, ‘Follow me’²⁶ Seeing two more brothers, Jesus called to them, as

well, and they travelled together throughout the region, Jesus “teaching in [the] synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.”²⁷ Understandably, “his fame spread,” and upon seeing the crowds following him, he “went up the mountain; and . . . began to speak, and taught them, saying, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’”²⁸

Oh, people of God, *see*:

. there is Jesus, born in the succession of God’s faithful, and there is Herod, this moldered estuary leeching an imperial line.

. there is Jesus, whose tender birth angels announce in dreams and visions, and there is Herod, whose nightmare reign feeds fear and terror.

. there is Jesus, whose mother and father risk everything to protect their family and flee for Egypt, and there is Herod who hunts them, who murders children in his pursuit.

And then, as Jesus’ ministry begins, the collision of these kingdoms – one for eternal peace, and one for worldly power – becomes more intimate and more intense. With Satan pitching world domination and the powerful beheading Christ’s herald as supertime sport, Jesus, a new sort of sovereign, takes to the mountaintop, sits, and teaches. With these brutalities swirling all around him and those he loves, Jesus declares comfort for the mourning, food for the hungry, and drink for the thirsty. *Doing what looks a whole lot like nothing*, Jesus promises mercy for the merciful and God – *God!* – for the pure in heart, kinship with the Divine for all who make Peace.²⁹

Lord, have mercy. The Beatitudes reinforce the values of Beloved Community against the values of empire. The world delivers fear, deceit, murder, gluttony, treachery, and *death*; the Christ offers Love, faith, healing, service, fullness, and *life*; and, in the thick of it all, you and I and all of us, we look for the Way.

Though American prisoners “facetiously called [the prison to which Colonel Certain was first taken] the ‘Hanoi Hilton,’” the French colonists who built it more than one hundred years earlier called it Maison Centrale.³⁰ And on the same site where Mary’s dad, former Senator John McCain, and other American servicemen were “held, interrogated, and beaten” – on that same patch of earth, the French had imprisoned and beheaded Vietnamese dissidents.³¹

In an especially tender moment, the *Smithsonian* article describes Colonel Certain’s wife – Mary’s mom, Robbie – feeling overcome with sadness and anger. “She sat on a bench next to a fellow former American POW’s wife who was crying[, and said,] ‘I don’t like humans harming other humans. I don’t understand that.’”³²

This war raging in the Holy Land – a horror not so unlike the war in Vietnam ... not so unlike the war in Sudan ... not so unlike the war in Ukraine ... not so unlike any of the terrors humankind has wrought upon itself – this war in Israel and Palestine again brings us closer to the collision of these ancient realms: the one Jesus inaugurates for Peace, and the one Herod pursues for power. And, even as we pray we never find ourselves in the throes of violence as did the Certain family and the Elliott family and those with whom they served and suffered and died; as the Israelis who were indiscriminately captured and murdered and the Palestinians who are suffering and dying without sanctuary; even as we pray for those who suffer half the world away, we feel these old reigns come scraping against us – tearing *inside* us – more intimately, more intensely.

However we might mark time – whether as curious exercises in our head or studies on paper ... by the week or by the millennium – be sure that these and all wars beget only blood and blood and blood; their legacies are a warring world without end. And no matter our circumstances or our politics, no matter our willful oversimplifications or our self-serving sensationalisms, God calls us Christians to remain steadfast in peaceableness, staying true in the ranks of ambassadors Jesus has commissioned for grace and mercy. Even now, surrounded as we are by cruelty and depravity, God calls us together to the mountainside, to these pews, and to this font, to receive once more these Beatitudes – blessings slipped between the bars of a prison cell – this holy call to join Jesus in Beloved Community and that Peace which passes all understanding.

Believing the way the world has been, need not be the way the world always is,
I pray that we would be loving companions in the household of God;
Amen.

¹ From Psalm 31.

² Matthew 1:1-17.

³ Redmon, Jeremy. “[Fifty Years After Their Release, Former Vietnam POWs Journey Back To Hanoi.](#)” *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 2023. A powerful piece, Redmon shares that his father flew the same “Linebacker II” missions with Colonel Certain, before taking his own life when the author was 14. Redmon writes with deeply moving admiration and ache.

⁴ I am grateful to Mary and her dad for reading this sermon before I preached it and for giving their blessing for me to deliver it today.

⁵ The story of the birth begins with Matthew 1:18, “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.” The reference to “Emmanuel” and Isaiah 7:14 begins with 1:22, “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.’”

⁶ Matthew 2:1a. “In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea ...”

⁷ Matthew 2:1b-2.

⁸ Matthew 2:3.

⁹ Matthew 2:7-8.

¹⁰ Matthew 2:10-11.

¹¹ Matthew 2:12.

¹² Matthew 2:13.

¹³ Matthew 2:12, 14-5.

¹⁴ Matthew 2:16a.

¹⁵ Matthew 2:16b.

¹⁶ I agree with the scholarly consensus that this event likely never happened as described in Matthew's Gospel, for – given its scale and wickedness – if the massacre *had* occurred, we would find corroboration of it in other extant sources from that period. I view the Gospel's invention as further evidence of how forcefully the Evangelist intends to distinguish between the reign of God and the reign of emperors.

¹⁷ Matthew 3:1.

¹⁸ Matthew 3:2.

¹⁹ Matthew 3:13-4:1.

²⁰ Matthew 4:3-10. Most directly in the third temptation (vv. 8-10): “Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! ...’”).

²¹ Matthew 4:11.

²² Matthew 4:12.

²³ Matthew 14:1-12. This is a lot of scriptural context to provide – even for me, who likes to provide a lot of scriptural context. I dare the lengths with intention to show just how awful the events surrounding the Sermon on the Mount are. While John's beheading appears somewhat later in the narrative, Jesus takes up the Baptist's message verbatim in 4:17 – “From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’” – holding John forebodingly close to the story, including on the mountainside in chapter 5.

²⁴ Redmon.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Matthew 4:12, 18-19.

²⁷ Matthew 4:23-25.

²⁸ Matthew 4:24, 5:1-3.

²⁹ Matthew 4:23-25.

³⁰ Redmon.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.