

God in the world  
Dec. 30, 2007  
Revelation 11: 15-18  
Matthew 2: 13-18

Herod killed babies. It is a tragic part of the birth story. It shows that Jesus came into a world where people lived in fear of their kings. Herod was like Saddam Hussein, who murdered anybody who was a threat. Who tortured and raped people, who killed thousands of Kurds with chemical weapons.

Jesus came into a world where people were subject to violence and oppression. But Jesus came and showed he was not that kind of king. He came as a baby and showed a power greater than Herod's rule by fear and violence. He came through a virgin birth and showed he was just as much a ruler as the Roman emperor who supposedly came through a virgin birth. He came as a willing sacrifice and showed a power greater than the Roman soldiers who executed him.

Jesus' life, death and resurrection was a revolutionary act in society. It was a revolutionary act for individual human hearts. He brought salvation for the individual and for the world.

Jesus died on the cross and came alive again, not only for my sins, but to undo the power of the evil in the world as well.

I rejoiced when I saw how tourists were free to enjoy Bethlehem this Christmas. There was no threat from soldiers and suicide bombers. Tiago Martins, 28, from Curitiba, Brazil, said he was excited about visiting. New peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians reassured him that there was no threat to his safety, he said, before crossing from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. "The idea that it's a Christian city makes me more calm, and I think going to the West Bank is more comfortable since Annapolis," Martins said, referring to the Israeli-Palestinian peace conference held in the U.S. last month.

Jesus came into a world of cruelty and assassinations and terrorism. We still live in a world of cruelty and assassinations and terrorism.

Benazir Bhutto was assassinated in Pakistan this week. It was a blow to Pakistan every bit as severe as the assassinations in our country was to us. And Jesus came to this kind of world.

I'm talking about God at work in society. For some of you, this sounds like liberalism. It sounds like something different than the true gospel. But it is not different, it is part of the true gospel. Our salvation leads us to compassion for the world.

Members of our church have gone on mission trips: Annagene Priske to an orphanage in India. Don and Joyce Jorgensen to a water project in Africa. Shannon Rogers and 10 youth to inner city Chicago. Carol and Bob Meyer to Mississippi for Hurricane Katrina repairs. Does that make them liberals? No, it makes them compassionate Christians.

I have said that Immanuel church is a church with an emphasis on personal commitment to Christ, preparing people to stand for their faith at home and in the world. We start with the basics and go deeper into personal maturity and further into a world where our children will need to work and witness.

In order to have a faith that can stand beyond our local church and community, it must be a social faith as well as a personal faith.

Faith tells us to make daily decisions according to what is most just for all. God's love is not only for me and mine and my country, but for the whole world. God so loved the world that he gave his only son. We do faith with and for others, or it is not faith.

Social faith is how the Bible applies to questions of society like war, abortion, hunger, sexuality, global warming, gambling, terrorism. Social faith is how the Bible gives me God's plan for the world and leads me to vote. Social faith is the time I give in community service.

A congregation needs both personal and social faith. I believe in both, and proclaim both. Jesus died for my sins and I've accepted Christ and been born again. Therefore, I honor Christ by being a partner in bringing love and justice to a broken world. Jesus died on the cross to transform the evil systems of the world as well as save me from the law of sin and death.

I know some of you don't want to hear this. You've learned that a true Christian knows Jesus as personal Lord and Savior and that's all. Some of you don't want your children to have a faith that can stand beyond Ripon. You don't want your children to leave town. Social morality sounds like more responsibility, and you've already got all the responsibility you can handle with personal morality. Social faith sounds liberal.

Rick Warren of "A Purpose Filled Life" has been organizing evangelical Christians to care for AIDS victims in Africa.

The movie "Amazing Grace" about ending slavery was made by evangelicals. Asbury College did the promotion for it. William Wilberforce, like John Wesley, had concerns about the poor and oppressed because of his personal faith.

World Vision, the largest independent evangelical relief and rehabilitation agency just last summer added a third pillar to their purpose: changing unjust social systems. That's not liberal, that's necessary ministry if the gospel is going to be spread.

God is in the world.

God has been more a part of the presidential campaign this year than years past. After the election of 2004, the media has finally noticed that people care about how God effects their values, and how their values effect their politics. The democratic candidates have spoken on CNN about how God plays a role in their lives. The republican candidates have answered to how their faith will effect their political decisions.

God is in the world.

Corn prices are higher for our farmers. This is good for Wisconsin farmers. But it is bad for poor Mexicans who cannot afford the price of tortillas. Mexican corn has had a good year, but it goes to supply American ethanol plants, not Mexican consumers.

Now why should we care? Don't we just care about ourselves and not the rest of the world?

If I didn't have faith in Christ, I wouldn't pay attention to these concerns. I'd feel like my job was to protect me and mine only. I'd feel like there was nothing I could do about the problems of the world. I'd feel like that was just the way the world was supposed to be, with famines and carbon in the atmosphere and AIDS and poverty and wars. But because Christ saved me for a life bigger than just me, I know my job is not just to protect me and mine only. Because Christ is creator of the world and has asked us Christians to care for it, I know this is not the way the world is supposed to be. Because Christ has connected me to other Christians in the world wide church, I know there is something I can do about the problems of the world.

The Bible tells me so.

You heard our choir sing a passage from the Bible, "The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ."

The bible tells us of God in the world.

Jesus said he had come to be good news to the poor, freedom for the oppressed, sight to the blind, liberty to the captives. (Luke 4: 16-21) Paul says to the Corinthians that Christ will overcome all evil powers and rule over all things. (I Cor. 15: 24-28) God's justice for the poor is built into Israel's history from the time of Moses on. The prophets remind us that we were once foreigners and need to treat foreigners with the respect and care we treat each other. Old testament laws and right worship included taking care of the poor. There are many more passages in the Bible about caring for the poor than there are about being born again and personal commitment to Christ. That doesn't mean personal commitment is not as important. Both are.

This past year was the Surge and Hannah Montana and Myth Busters and Guitar Hero and a 12-3 record. It's been a year of immigration and 6 percent of Ripon school kids who speak Spanish. It had a massacre at Virginia Tech and mortgage crisis, global warming and a bridge collapse. It had the presidential campaign and Iraq War.

This is the world God enters in Jesus.

God is in the heroic people who risked their lives pulling others out of their cars after the bridge collapsed in Minneapolis. God is in pastor Mike Herdt and other pastors in Crandon pointing people to life after the murders there. God is helping us figure out ways to help people who are coming to our town looking for jobs just as our ancestors did. When we follow God there, it is social faith.

Holiness of heart leads to holiness of life. Transformation of the heart leads to transformation of the world.

Herod killed babies. But we don't follow a king like that. We belong to a king who rules with justice and mercy, not fear of violence. We will go where Jesus goes, into the world.