

# Suffering Presence or Saving Presence

---

**Ernest F. Krug, III**  
**Third Presbyterian Church**  
**January 1, 2017**  
**Matthew 2: 13-23**

Thomas Andrew Dorsey is known as the “father of black gospel music.” He was born in rural Georgia in 1899. He was a prolific songwriter and blues musician, the son of an itinerant preacher and musician mother. He grew up in poverty, but he also grew up in the church. He was drawn to the piano and taught himself to play. He began his musical career playing in clubs to make ends meet. He would also play in churches and eventually devoted himself to church music, though there was initial resistance to his brand of gospel and blues. In August of 1933, when he was 33 years old, he was invited to be a soloist at a large revival meeting in St. Louis. His wife was pregnant and near the end of her pregnancy. He hated to leave her, but this was a great opportunity, and she wanted him to go. Shortly after arriving in St. Louis he received a telegram. It read: “Your wife has just died.” He quickly returned to their home in Chicago to discover that his newborn son, Thomas Andrew Dorsey, Jr., had died two days after his mother. Thomas Dorsey was a broken man. He believed God was unfair, and who of us wouldn’t believe the same? He gave up music and considered ending his own life.

And so we turn to our lectionary Gospel reading for this morning. How can this passage speak to Thomas Dorsey and to us? It is a narrative about the survival of one child and his family and about the death of innocent children, in this case under the order of a vicious despot, King Herod. This was, by the way, a time of prosperity under the Roman Empire, yet Herod chose to rule with violence, even murdering members of his own family to insure his grip on power. He was the son of Jewish converts, but showed no reverence for Judaism. He rose to power during a period of civil unrest and created a peaceful kingdom for himself by means of political manipulation and oppression. When three Gentile astrologers from the east came to Jerusalem asking Herod where they might find the child who had been born king of the Jews, Herod’s world was turned upside down. He had to be sure that there

would be no future threat to his throne. Joseph is warned in a dream to escape from Bethlehem with Mary and Jesus just before Herod's soldiers move in to murder all males under the age of two. As Barbara Brown Taylor has written, the First Sunday after Christmas, also today the first day of the new year, "may be no better day to confront the truth that neither God's presence nor Christ's birth rids the world of horror and death."

We in the United States live in a time of prosperity, when we consider our standard of living compared to most other people in the world. We also live in an age where there is much violence. We are reminded regularly about the tragedy in Aleppo and its survivors, who now suffer in refugee camps. And children die daily around the world from disease, accidents, terrorism, and homicides. We might naturally blame God for not being attentive to our needs and well-being. If we think of Jesus as one human being among others, it makes sense to wonder why there was no warning to all the other parents in Bethlehem. And yet, Herod's soldiers would surely have hunted fleeing families down. Violence is never averted for long. Matthew's response in the Gospel to this question of evil is a confessional statement about who Jesus is. He is not any man; he is every man. God took on human nature to bring saving grace to a hurting world. Jesus' life was preserved in his infancy not for him to enjoy "the good life," but so that he might demonstrate through his life the suffering presence of God caring for each person in life but also beyond death. The saving presence of God was to be understood in the suffering presence of his Son, Jesus Christ. So, that is the answer to the question in the sermon title. Is it a satisfying answer?

Dangers, risks, disability, and death are an ever-present part of our lives. But God is present in our darkness and distress—a promise we can count on. And God is active in redeeming God's creation, especially humanity. A central theme in Matthew's Gospel is the conflict between two kingdoms: one eternal, the other transitory; one governed by love, the other by power and forces beyond our control. There is death of innocents at the beginning of Jesus' life and at the end—in his own death—though Jesus' promise is that his death is not the end. God's dominion continually clashes with human powers that seek not to serve God but rather to serve their own interests, fueled by fear of losing control. To quote Yoda from "Star Wars": "Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering."

The message of the Gospel is that God suffers with us. God continually asks us not to fear, but to trust God's care for us. We, on the other hand, continually look for ways to protect ourselves. Anger and hate close in on the manger. God responds this way: God's suffering presence is God's saving presence, where love redeems us in and through our suffering. But we must believe in God's promise to be present with us. We cannot guarantee that presence, not even through our religious rituals. We cannot locate it in time and space. We can experience it in love, when we meet Christ in a human relationship and find ourselves giving ourselves away to some purpose greater than ourselves out of love for others.

The Magi met saving presence in the infant Jesus when they discovered him in a Bethlehem stable. As a result of that encounter, they took a different road home—not the road back to the death-dealing Herod. On this first Sunday after Christmas let's lay aside the sentimentality and magic of Christmas, which is truly disturbing to many who experience depression and anxiety in this season. Let's look at the crèche and see only Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus. No shepherds, no kings, no peaceful scenes with stable animals--only preparation for escape from destruction. Now let's look at our own experience when we perceive the approach of tragedy. Escape may not, often is not, possible. Where do we look for a sign that God is truly with us when the death of someone we love or a divorce or the loss of a job tears a vital source of meaning from our lives? We won't find it in the celebrations of Christmas, no matter how magical they might be. We may find it in the image of the vulnerable infant Jesus, the manifest reality of "God with us." We can find it when our experience of Christ's love for you, for me, opens a path to life and light and away from death-dealing self-destruction.

Jesus the vulnerable infant and Jesus the vulnerable man asks something very hard of us. He asks us to give testimony to God's faithfulness even when our world is collapsing around us. The big question for the people of Israel when they were defeated and sent into exile in the 6th. Century BCE; the big question for the people of Bethlehem when their infants were slaughtered; the big question for any of us when we despair is: What kind of testimony does a faithful person give in the face of death and loss? In an interview decades after the tragic death of his wife and son, Thomas Dorsey told about friends

coming to visit him that tragic day when he was grieving their deaths. The friends said things to him they hoped would be soothing and reassuring. He said, "Nothing soothed me then and nothing has been soothing to me from that day to this day." A few years later, when he continued to be burdened with overwhelming grief and had not been able to do any work, two friends came to see him. He told them, "I don't know what to do or how to do. I'm just trying to talk to the Lord." One of the friends said, "No, that's not right. It's not, 'Lord', it's 'Precious Lord'."

Now what would you say to a friend telling you that you were not being respectful enough to the Lord, particularly when even trying to talk to God was a chore. I think it might make me a bit irritated. It reminds me of conversations Martha and I had with members of this congregation working through their grief after the death of someone they loved very much. A recurrent theme was irritation at religious platitudes directed to them for comfort when they weren't comforting at all. They simply wanted someone to be with them, not try to talk them out of their grief or tell them think differently about how to grieve. The comment by Thomas Dorsey's friend also reminds me of Job's friends coming by to help him get right with God. Surely, they figured, he must have done something to deserve the tragedies that had befallen him. There are those, of course, who still believe this. They believe it because they want to believe that life is fair and predictable, which it isn't. When tragedy strikes them, they cry out to God because they have been treated unfairly.

Mr. Dorsey was a man of faith. He gradually came to the conclusion that he could not blame God for the death of his wife and newborn son. But he didn't know what to say to God. He felt a deep lament but he had no words. When his friend said, "Say Precious Lord," he reports that he began to sing these words, which, he believed, were given to him by God:

Precious Lord, take my hand, Lead me on, help me stand; I am tired,  
I am weak, I am worn; through the storm, through the night, lead me  
On to the light; take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

When my way grows drear, Precious Lord, linger near; when my life  
Is almost gone, hear my cry, hear my call, hold my hand lest I fall;  
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

Thomas Dorsey, at a deep level, believed in God's faithfulness, and he practiced endurance. I believe the presence of the Holy Spirit gave him those words from deep within his grieving soul. Through his endurance in the midst of his great suffering, he came to understand that God was and always had been suffering with him. God's purpose would win out, but this was a vulnerable God, who, in Jesus Christ, was edged out of the world and onto a cross. In Jesus he had a friend and companion. Dorsey knew, at a level deeper than consciousness, that his Lord would guide him home where a person's soul finds its rest in God. He went on to write hundreds of Gospel songs and draw many into faith through the example of his life and his commitment to serving Christ. Please rise in body or spirit to sing his most famous song, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." May it confirm in each of us God's persistent presence with us.