

Creating Space for Christ  
a.k.a. Everybody Loves a Villain  
Matthew 2:13-23  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
December 29, 2019  
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While *Beauty and the Beast* is a 17<sup>th</sup> century French fairy tale and while it has been made into big screen, small screen and stage shows many times over the last 75 years, I am guessing most of us know it best from the 1991 Disney animated feature, or for the younger ones among us, perhaps the 2017 Disney live-action adaptation.

In the movie *Beauty and the Beast*, we meet the character Gaston well before we meet the beast. Gaston is muscular, handsome and as arrogant as they come. He is more in love with himself and his own self-interest than he ever will be with another person. And he chooses Belle, also known as Beauty, as the girl he wants to marry. This choice has nothing to do with compatibility or personal relationship but only with the fact that she is the prettiest girl in town and as he says – that makes her the best. And he is sure he deserves the best.

As the movie begins, he seems like an annoying but basically benign character. He is the stereotypical manly man who woman love to love and men want to be like. For many of us he is appalling, but still perceived as harmless.

Harmless until he feels threatened. When Belle ends up finding a friend in and later falling in love with the beast, Gaston takes it upon himself to rally the townspeople to go and fight the beast, invoking fear about the threat this prince-turned-beast is to them.

And what is interesting is that it doesn't take much to get the town riled up and ready to go and beat down the palace doors. When he decides the beast is a threat, everyone falls in line. And we see a theme that we see too often across literature and history – that everyone loves a villain.

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And maybe love isn't the right word. Maybe it's not that we love those who lead with arrogance and anger, who inspire fear...maybe people follow because of that fear. But whatever the motivator, too often it seems the villain gets the upper hand.

And the same is true in our story today. While we aren't told in Matthew that everyone *loved* Herod we certainly see that everyone cowers to him to the point where the wisemen, in the previous verses, go home by another route in order to avoid him, and the decree to kill all children two years old and under is not challenged. Perhaps structurally it is unable to be challenged, but we are given no evidence that anyone even tries.

It is too easy to love, or at least follow, or at least be silenced by, the powerful villain in our midst.

So, why are we talking about this today. This is the Christmas season. On Christmas Eve we heard the stories of the birth of baby Jesus. We celebrate Jesus as the savior, as God-with-us. Tradition has talked of Jesus as fully human and fully divine. We look to Jesus as the one to not only save us from our sins, but to lead us to a changing world. This is a time of joy of celebration.

Why dare we read these verses?

And perhaps the reason is because we must dare. We must be willing to read these verses and to be honest about the times when we are the ones loving the villain. Because villains don't always come in clear packaging that makes us aware of their status. I think of another Disney movie – The Little Mermaid. There, Ursula is packaged in such a way that from the moment you see her you quiver and quake just a little. And yet so often the villains among us wear the titles and clothing of the people in power, they wear the titles and clothing of the people next door, they look like who we think we want to be.

And so, we are called to discern the difference. We are called as people who claim to be Christians, to follow one who was, according to Luke's gospel, born in a stable to poor parents in a time of a powerful empire...one who was, according to Matthew, forced within his first two years of life to flee to another country as a refugee, and to even – when his parents returned home with him – to have to find a new home because of the threat of the king.

And so, this season reminds us not *just* to celebrate that baby Jesus was born, not *just* to celebrate that God loves us, not *just* to sing joy to the world...but this season reminds us that we have choices to make. We have choices to make about where our loyalty lies. And these choices are about far more than if we call ourselves people of faith or show up for worship on Sunday mornings. These choices are about far more than if we can quote a little scripture or talk about God's love. These choices are about how the message of God-with-us, of God loving us so much that no matter what we cannot escape it, of God not only choosing us and those like us, but choosing all people especially those who are outcast, who are poor, who are removed from positions of power and privilege – these choices that we have to make about how this story impacts us are important choices. They are important choices because, if we let it, this story will change our priorities and our living, it will change how we think about and treat other people, it will change who we are. It may not be that we have to decide whether to challenge a king who is killing children, but daily in our actions and inactions, in the way we choose to see others or simply focus on ourselves, in our willingness or lack thereof to risk ourselves and stand up for another – we do choose who to follow.

And in addition to this Christmas season, we are about ready to turn our calendar to a new year, a time when – whether we really live into it or not – we think about fresh starts, we think about good choices. January is the month when people join the gym, it is the month when

people get their finances in order, it is the month when people set goals about mending broken relationships, about education, about vocational success. And so, it is the time when we are already thinking about being our better selves.

So here in this Christmas season when we read the story of the villain who is threatening Jesus, we are reminded that if we are to create space for Christ we have to be honest about the times when we follow or at least cowtow to the villains in our midst. We have to be honest about the times when it is easier for us to do the wrong thing than to take the risk to do the right thing. And, if we are to follow in the ways of Jesus, we have to be willing to change those choices and to live from God's love.

Creating space for Christ...it is about more than putting some hay and a warm blanket in a manger for the children's program...it is about more than the feel good moment of holding candles and singing *Silent Night* on Christmas Eve...creating space for Christ is about opening ourselves that we might be changed, even in difficult ways, in order that we might reflect the ways and heart of God in this world.

Amen.