

"The Crib and the Cross"  
Matthew 1:18-25  
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One month ago, the name Luigi Mangione meant nothing to most people- if it HAD come up during polite conversation, the typical response would most likely have been "Luigi WHO?" But TODAY, he's known all over the country as the young man who on a busy New York City street shot and killed the chief executive of United Healthcare Corporation, one of our nation's largest medical insurance companies- someone he had never even MET. Among Mangione's belongings was a three-page manifesto blaming the victim for all the "wrongs" and "injustices," not just in the insurance industry but in his life and even throughout THE WORLD.

What people have found so confounding is that when Luigi was born 26 years ago, he was immediately plunged into a life of wealth and privilege and provided with every social and material advantage one could ask for. He comes from a family of over-achievers as his sister is a medical doctor while he became the valedictorian of his senior class at an exclusive prep school. He graduated from the University of Pennsylvania, an Ivy League college which accepts less than 10% of its applicants. Handsome and charming, Luigi was a standout athlete who kept his body toned and in tiptop condition. It seemed a matter of course that he'd be a success in WHATEVER he chose to do with his life, that the world was his oyster and he was its pearl. Certainly, great things were expected to come from him! But NOW, just try to imagine how broken his parents must be knowing that their promising son is languishing in one of New York's worst prisons indicted for first-degree murder and possibly facing the death penalty for his terrible crime.

This past week, Natalie Rupnow, a 15-year-old girl attending a private Christian academy in Madison, Wisconsin, entered her school with a handgun hidden in her backpack. For reasons we might never learn, she shot one student and a teacher to death while leaving two other children in critical condition before taking her OWN life. I assume she came from a Christian home and was not in any way raised with violent tendencies. I can also guess that upon learning of the news, nobody could be MORE SHOCKED than her own parents who had to be asking themselves WHY: "WHY would our little girl commit such a heinous tragedy?" "HOW could we not have seen signs of this coming?" and "Where did WE go WRONG!"

We naturally assume that every infant born into the world enters as a child of hope, or so we would LIKE to believe. Every mother and father has certain dreams for their little baby- and while some MEET them, and some even EXCEED them, MANY MORE will fall FAR TOO SHORT. With the fulfillment of ONE parent's dreams, there will be HUNDREDS of others who'll never live up to those expectations or share that SAME pride and joy. Every son and daughter who died of a drug overdose or was shot robbing a liquor store or who now sits on death row watching the hours tick by began as a child of promise, a child of many dreams only to see them all dissolve so suddenly into a fiendish nightmare.

The natural question is whether the tragic trajectory taken by these two individuals was destined from the start or could it have been averted with the right dosage of love and instruction.

The answer, of course, is that NO child is ever DESTINED for such a life of crime and violence, that MOST children whose family lives are enmeshed in abuse and neglect NEVER get into such trouble themselves; not ALL kids from violent families will be violent themselves. HOWEVER, the MORE VIOLENCE that kids are exposed to, the GREATER THE LIKELIHOOD that they TOO will become violent. Children in general learn their MOST IMPORTANT behavioral lessons--healthful or UNHEALTHFUL--from their families; it is UNQUESTIONABLY the strongest socializing influence for a young child.

Well let me tell you about ANOTHER woman's dream whose aspirations began equally as great for HER son but ended just as TRAGICALLY. You have to go back many years, more than 2000 of them, to that little town of Nazareth in the province of Galilee where a woman lived by the name of Mary. Now, you already know the strange circumstances concerning her son's birth- how she became mysteriously pregnant by the Holy Spirit when she had known no man; how the child in her womb had been prophesied over by the angel Gabriel, by Zachariah the priest, and then her cousin Elizabeth. She did not perfectly understand but she perfectly believed that there was something special about her baby. When Mary's child was born, Joseph named him Jesus, meaning "Savior," at the instruction of the angel who had appeared to him in a dream. Though it might seem a very special name to US, it was actually a very COMMON name for boys living in Judah, as common as John is for us today. Jesus was the Greek form of the Hebrew name "Joshua," and Joshua was the great soldier and friend of Moses who led God's people out of the wilderness into the Promised Land.

But Israel had been out of the Promised Land now for almost a thousand years. Since those glory days under King David, Israel had been conquered again and again by foreign invaders, her inhabitants taken into exile, and her cities plundered and levelled. All they had was a promise spoken by the prophets of old, a hope that God would one day send forth a son and the government would be upon his shoulder. His name would be called Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. The increase of his government and its peace would be without end, and it would be established upon justice forever. It was a GREAT promise and every parent in Judah lived in the expectation that his or her son might be the one to deliver them from the yoke of Rome and re-establish the glory that once belonged to her. Therefore, they all named their sons "Jesus"--or "Deliverer"--in the expectation that their son might possibly become that leader.

What links us this morning with Joseph and Mary and the rest of those parents and grandparents in Judah is that we are all united by common hopes and aspirations at the birth of a child. A newborn infant has its whole life still ahead of it and we all play an important part in giving direction to that young life. As we look upon the vulnerability and innocence of a newborn child or grandchild, we don't anticipate the years of struggle and bitterness, sickness and sin, that lay ahead for him or for her. In fact, such thoughts DON'T EVEN ENTER OUR MINDS. Rather, we think of all the loves, the joys, and the successes that STILL AWAIT them. Maybe in our sentimentality we wish for the moment that they didn't HAVE to grow up, that they could remain fresh, unspoiled, and surrounded by love. And we are filled with anticipation and optimism as we look at our children PRECISELY because we don't know what WILL happen, how the chapter WILL end in their life- as they say, nature abhors a vacuum and we tend to fill it with our OWN hopes and dreams. What we DO know or at least HOPE is that they'll go on to fill out their life with all of the rare qualities and special gifts they possess and, in some small measure, have made

our world a better place for OTHERS for having been born into it.

Yet, how much different it is for us as we look at that child in Bethlehem, laid in a manger. Though Joseph and Mary share the same hopes and optimism for the life of THEIR child, WE know better, DON'T we. They only see Jesus's life at the BEGINNING- while it is yet a beautiful Hallmark card, a Currier and Ives print, a Norman Rockwell painting. They don't know what is coming as WE do- the baptism, the temptations, the calling of the twelve, the wonderful ministry of teaching and healing, the conflict with hardened Pharisees, the acclaim of the mob, the Last Supper, the betrayal, and then, WORST of all- the Crucifixion. As we remember the beauty and purity of his life, and then reflect upon the ugly, brutal death he was subjected to, we're tempted to cry out: "Oh, gentle Son of God, do not come into such a world. It will destroy you. This is no place for sacrificial love. There is no room for someone who cares nothing for money, prestige, and power, for someone so good and as well-intentioned as yourself, as someone about to suffer agony and confront such hatred as YOU WILL. This kind of world will BREAK you; it will seek to CRUSH you and then CAST you aside and FORGET about you." Once we shake those naive hopes and dreams from out of our heads, we must then conclude that this is no world for Jesus- a world which preaches the survival of the fittest; a world which turns our closest allies into our stiffest competitors; a world in which security can be maintained only through suspicion and guile; a world where millions are torn from their homes and laid on the altar of war; a world of plague and hunger and tyranny and unbelief. This is no place for a child so frail, so pure, so vulnerable, so beautiful.

And if this is no place for JESUS, then what can we say for our OWN children. If this is the kind of arena THEY are entering, what chance do THEY have of making it, of surviving with THEIR faith and values intact. What chance do THEY have of fulfilling their OWN hopes and dreams when it appears like life is conspiring to knock you down and crush you at every turn. Right now, I can't help but think of my four nephews and nieces--my sister's four eldest children--who in the prime of their OWN lives got caught up in various addictions of one kind or another and who all eventually lost their life to either drugs or alcohol poisoning. The irony was that I was present at the hospital on the day each one of them came into this world and I was ALSO the one who presided over each one of their funerals, after they died!

It is at this point we have to depart from all the nostalgia and sentiment of the Christmas story and see it for what it TRULY is. Yes, shepherds gathered round the baby Jesus and Magi deposited their gifts before him, but that is only HALF the story. We push the horrible backdrop out of the picture only to remember the more PLEASANT parts. We forget that the reason they were there in a manger--a filthy, stinking animal pen as all mangers are--in the first place, was because of the drunkenness and the selfishness of the revelers at the inn. We conveniently forget that Herod had made an all-out assault on that child, that he had ordered the massacre of all children of Bethlehem and its neighborhood from the age of two on down. Joseph and Mary's joy was no less the bitter grief and pain for thousands of other fathers and mothers throughout Judah.

This is the other side of life, the stark, brutal side that has to be confronted AS WELL. Yes, the scripture says, "The virgin will conceive and bear a son, and he shall be called Emmanuel, a name which means 'God with us.'" Joseph and Mary would name that son "Jesus" (meaning Savior) for he would one day save his people from their sins. But where ours and thousands of other babies just like her's are born each day to find themselves and figure out their purpose and meaning in life,

Jesus ALREADY enters it with a CLEARLY ESTABLISHED purpose. Where OUR children, like ourselves, were born into this world to LIVE, Christ is unique in that he is the ONLY PERSON in all of HISTORY who came SPECIFICALLY TO DIE, to become an offering for many that the world might find freedom from sin and death, hopelessness and despair.

With Jesus's birth, it becomes the story of God taking upon himself the form and substance of his own creation- the Creator becoming ONE with the creature. At that very moment in history, God came among us in the person of his Son- an act without precedent. In Jesus Christ, God bore forsakenness, anguish, hunger and thirst in all its ultimacy. In the end, he drank from that cup you and I spend so much of our lives seeking to insulate ourselves from- a bitter mixture of guilt and suffering and death. In the final analysis, one can say he LITERALLY LOVED himself to death.

The bottom line is that if we never GET BEYOND that scene of the infant Jesus lying in a manger, we will NEVER DISCOVER the hope and salvation that lies at the foot of the Cross. An infant cannot save, but a Lord who takes our guilt and suffering and death upon himself, who exchanges his own purity and holiness for our wretchedness, CAN save and HE DOES. We have to see that cross that loomed over that crib and how the significance of Jesus's birth was that it set in motion a plan that opened the way for his eventual death and resurrection. FOR ONLY IN HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION can there be any REAL hope and REAL life in this world. In that one child ALONE did all the promises of the Old Testament rest. In HIM lay all the hopes and dreams of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; of Joseph and Moses; of Samuel and Elijah, Ruth, David and all the major and minor prophets. If Christ was not sacrificed, all the faith of all the righteous in all the world would avail nothing and no one. The history of God's dealings with his people culminated in that child fulfilling the task set before him, and that had to entail suffering, rejection, shame and death upon a cross of wood.

This morning, we need to look past our precious postcard picture of Jesus which we would PREFER to confine Christmas to. Think of how charming it would be if we could just restrict Jesus to that manger scene and never let him grow up, to keep him suckling the breast of his adoring mother while accompanied by admiring shepherds, singing animals, and a little drummer boy offering a solo in tribute. It would be like a Thomas Kinkaid painting- a warm and picture-perfect tableau devoid of any of the hatred and violence that characterizes the REAL world. Such a proposal would seem far preferable and much less disturbing than the one the SCRIPTURES provide for us- an infant under the SHADOW OF THE CROSS, a child with the MARK OF DEATH UPON HIS BROW, a peace that is intermixed with A DIVINE SORROW. However, it is this LATTER view of Christmas which ALONE can save souls and bring healing because it anticipates a sacrifice on behalf of the world and the ONLY picture of the Christ child worthy of our adoration. WITHOUT A CROSS, there would be no Christmas, no cause for celebration, no carols and joy bells for us to ring out; WITHOUT GOLGOTHA, "the place of the skull," that manger scene in Bethlehem would be just a pretty Currier and Ives print to hang on our living room wall; WITHOUT GOOD FRIDAY, he would never have received the name Jesus, meaning "savior."

Therefore, let us remember that this Wednesday, as we make our OWN pilgrimage to Bethlehem to welcome that child into the world, we celebrate and adore him, NOT merely because that baby might take our mind away from the problems and chaos and tensions that characterize much of our present world, at least for a few hours. But MUCH MORE, it is BECAUSE in this

scene, sin and death stand out where we would rather NOT have it intrude and yet it is FOR THAT VERY REASON that we love him so. For apart from the message of Good Friday and Easter, Christmas would have no message for us AT ALL. Let us pray...

*Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, this morning, we pray that you would pour forth your grace upon us throughout this Christmas season, that as we have known the incarnation of Jesus, your Son by the message of an angel, so by His passion and cross we may be brought to understand and appreciate all the more the glory of His Resurrection. Through Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.*