

Christmas unvarnished: A savior for a troubled world

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [December 12, 2012](#) issue



© KEVIN DOOLEY, DESIGN BY MARY ELLEN PAGE (VIA FLICKR, CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE)

Five years ago I preached a Christmas sermon that struck out with one family.

I know that preaching can be a dangerous business. But I've always thought the hazard was wrapped in the risk of trying to handle divine mysteries. Hold those mysteries too casually and you're as good as someone who drops babies on a regular basis.

What I underestimated on that particular Christmas night was the peril of tampering with holiday sentiment. The sermon I preached, which is still vivid in my mind, was evidently too much for this family. It sent them packing. The mother told me in the receiving line that mention of children being murdered had no place in a Christmas sermon. "I will never set foot in this church again." She has faithfully lived up to her

word. Except for spotting her in a restaurant one time, I haven't seen her since she shook my hand at that midnight hour and calmly placed her candle and cardboard drip-catcher in the box.

The mention of murder she noted involved my reference to a little boy in a rough section of Trenton, New Jersey, whose body was found stuffed in a bag under a fire escape. A local church had made a practice of picking up this little guy and his mother every week to transport them to worship. Two Sundays before Christmas, they were not at the curb when the van showed up. Unbeknownst to the driver, police were behind the apartment building comforting the distraught mother and investigating the crime scene.

Christmas will always mean different things to different people. But according to the Gospel of Matthew's account of Christ's birth, there was evil knocking on the door even as Mary was inside trying to figure out the breast-feeding thing. King Herod, a thug of the first order, was determined to destroy this newborn. When fulfilling that desire proved elusive, he summarily ordered the murder of every child two years old and younger in and around Bethlehem.

It may seem strange to find such brutality woven into the sweetness of Christmas. Yet Matthew saw the need for a savior as clearly as anyone. The evil of his day persists in barely altered form in our day. Cruelty shows no sign of evaporating. So who wants a savior with no teeth for justice, no spine for compassion and no heart for the trampled? Personally, I'll take a savior who is up to the task of helping lost people find their way—one who can teach broken communities how to pull together. Isn't that your longing as well? The Lord we need to meet is one unafraid to assist a troubled world in recalibrating its moral compass.

Late in the fall of 2011, Philadelphia police came upon what the police commissioner there called an "incredibly tangled web of horror." Four mentally handicapped adults were discovered malnourished and imprisoned in the filthy basement of an apartment building. One was chained to the furnace. Two had been in this form of wretched captivity for more than 11 years. It was all part of a grand scheme by four captors to steal their Social Security disability checks.

No, this story from the City of Brotherly Love didn't make my Christmas sermon last year, and it won't make this year's. It's just a palpable reminder of why a Christian Christmas is always about more than sipping peppermint cocoa by a warm, crackling

fire. God came into the world through intense labor pains to meet the absence of brotherly and sisterly love. God's encounter with our often cruel species would happen in a face-to-face manner, a flesh-to-flesh way. The wake-up call began with Jesus. As his love spread beyond the confines of Bethlehem, your face and body—and mine—somehow became involved.

So we celebrate Christmas with a joy that must seem odd to some. We sing our hearts out. We cherish relationships that are not entirely perfect. We look other people in the eye. We give chunks of ourselves away. It's not that hatred and cruelty have disappeared. It's that the arrival of love in the midst of the sorry mess we have made of creation gives Christmas its special wonder.