Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Isaiah 63:7-9

63:7 I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD, the praiseworthy acts of the LORD, because of all that the LORD has done for us, and the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. 8 For he said, "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely"; and he became their savior 9 in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

Commentary

These moving verses are actually the first few lines of a much longer song. Like many of the psalms, it pours forth both praise and lament, trust and fear, joy and sorrow, as the past deeds for God and the people are recounted in light of the tragedy of recent events. God, like a loving parent, became their “savior”, their protector, the one who redeemed them from their afflictions. One has only to remember their sufferings in Egyptian bondage and how they cried out to God. God entered into their life, was afflicted with them, and felt their pain. God suffered with them. This is the same God whose love enters into our life through Jesus, suffers and dies for us, and makes possible our reconciliation with God. One of the great gifts God has given us is the ability to remember (although sometimes there are things we wish we would forget). To remember means to make present again that which is past. This passage bids us to remember, constantly to name the many acts of God’s faithfulness in our own lives and history, for that sometimes is the only way we can deal with a painful present.

Reflection

How can God be almighty and subject to pain? Is this a comforting or disturbing thought for you?
Hebrews 2:10-18

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying, "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you." And again, "I will put my trust in him." And again, "Here am I and the children whom God has given me." Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Commentary

This passage continues last week’s emphasis on the Incarnation, that is, God with us (Emmanuel) through the person and work of Jesus. Like today’s Isaiah reading, it tells us how God suffered with us through Jesus Christ. The author of Hebrews presents a strong Christology (doctrine of Christ), showing Jesus as a pioneer, sanctifier, brother, conqueror of spiritual slavery and death, merciful and faithful high priest, atoner for sin, and partner in suffering and temptation. We do not know entirely what the concerns and beliefs of this congregation were, but we can assume they had some preoccupation with angels and other celestial figures.

Reflection

What image of Jesus Christ is the most powerful for you?

Matthew 2:13-23

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud
lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." 19 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." 20 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 21 But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. 22 There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

Commentary

You may say that Herod was the real Grinch who tried, not to steal Christmas, but to prevent it altogether. He ruled from about 37 to 4 B.C. Even though he improved and greatly embellished the Temple, most people hated him. He was vain, ambitious, and paranoid. He dealt with any threat to his power harshly, including murdering his wife and several relatives, thus removing rivals to the throne. So, when Matthew 2:3 states that Herod was frightened when he heard of a messiah being born, and that all of Jerusalem was also afraid, we know why. After the wise men had departed from Herod, Joseph had another dream that Herod was going to try to kill Jesus. Instead, he was to flee to Egypt, where Herod was not in control. Jews had for centuries sought refuge in Egypt. The situation is reminiscent of the story of Moses, who came from Egypt and whose early life was endangered by another evil ruler—Pharoah.

Reflection

How do you explain why, in the same situation, some are hurt and others are spared? Is this a matter of chance, fate, or God’s intent?

Responsive Psalter

From Psalm 148

148:1 Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights!

2 Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!

3 Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!

4 Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!

5 Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created.

6 He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

7 Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!

Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!

Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!

Young men and women alike, old and young together!

Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven.

He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the LORD!

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.