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Church of the Redeemer January 4, 2004

1.

The great English New Testament scholar N.T. Wright tells the story of preaching at a large Christmas service which a famously skeptical historian had been persuaded by his family to attend. At the door, the historian approached Wright.

“I’ve finally worked out” he declared, “why people like Christmas.”

“Really,” Wright said. “Do tell me.”

“A baby threatens no one,” he said, “so the whole thing is a happy event which means nothing at all.”

Wright was dumbfounded, as would anyone be who had read today's gospel. For Christians, the story of Jesus's birth does not end with the happy tableau of the Holy Family gathered with the animals. For Christians, the story continues with today's account of the flight into Egypt. Herod, the puppet king of Judea, has heard of the messianic child's birth and will search for the child, to destroy him. So, in Matthew's telling of the story, Joseph takes his family and flees to safety in Egypt. Our lectionary has politely left out what Joseph and his family escaped: "Herod was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old and under." [Matthew 2.16] The disbelieving historian's comfortable account of Christmas has no place to put the flight into Egypt or the slaughter of the innocents. It may seem to a skeptic that a baby threatens no one, but we who have lived through the 20th century know otherwise. Even as a baby, Jesus poses a threat to the most powerful man around. What gives?

When I was 10 years old, in 1959, I started buying my own books. And I remember that one of the first books I ever bought for myself was a pocket book edition of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. I must have read that book two or three times when I was in fifth grade, and I was fascinated with it for a couple of reasons. The first is that, at the elementary school I attended in Beverly Hills, I was one of the few gentle kids, and as I came to historical consciousness I wanted to learn more and more about the Holocaust, about which all of my Jewish classmates knew a good deal more than I did. The second reason I found Anne Frank's story compelling was this: even then I wondered what kind of regime would find a child threatening? Anne Frank's diary is horrifying when you realize that the person narrating it is a child. Who would want to eliminate children? you ask. The answer: Herod, and Hitler, and any society insecure about the basis of its authority.

We have all just lived through the Holiday Season, a time when our culture seems to hold up children as symbols of special veneration. We go to such effort to provide a perfect Christmas experience for our children. Part of that, surely, is the attempt to recreate our own remembered childhood holidays, but mostly it stems from our desire to lavish as much love and care on our children as we can. Children are precious to us: witness the number of institutions in this community alone which specialize in the education, formation, and nurture of children. We want our children to have the best of everything, and that desire is not peculiar to the affluent. Whether we are rich or poor, children are important to us adults. They are precious.

Today is the Second Sunday after Christmas Day, a morning on which we thank God in today's collect for wonderfully creating and restoring "the dignity of human nature." You can tell how much dignity a person or a society affords human nature by the way in which they treat children. It is easy and natural for us to be

gracious and deferential to those who have prestige or power; it is harder for us to extend the same courtesy to those who have none. I remember once seeing the child psychiatrist Bairn Ginott on television in the early 1970s, and he was talking about parental consistency. He said that we need to treat our children as we treat the guests who come into our houses. If little Billy spills a glass of milk and you yell and scream at him, and then if Mrs. Jones spills a glass of milk and you tell her it's no bother, little Billy is getting a mixed message. Ginott's solution: either treat Billy with courtesy and respect, or tell Mrs. Jones she's a butter-fingered idiot. But do try to be consistent.

The Christmas season is an important time for us because it is when we remember, in Charles Dickens's words, that "it is good to be children sometimes, and never better than at Christmas, when its mighty Founder was a child himself." [A Christmas Carol, p. 60]. It is easy for us to respect the grown-up Jesus, but it is just as important for us to respect the child Jesus, because the child Jesus symbolizes human nature at its most precious and its most vulnerable. We are not the first culture to be both romantic about and abusive of children at the same time. But we are a religious tradition which has built into its very core a proclamation that God became one of us as a poor, vulnerable human child. If that isn't a warrant for respecting the dignity of children, I don't know what is.

II.

Given the amount of energy we all put into Christmas preparations, I'm not surprised that many people missed the front page story in The New York Times on Christmas Eve. The headline read, "Millions of AIDS Orphans Strain Southern Africa," and the subhead read, "Children Abandoned as Families and Officials are Overwhelmed". A four-column color picture at the top of the page showed a child looking through the bars of a crib in an AIDS orphanage in Mozambique.

I read this article on December 24 with the same horrified fascination with which I devoured Anne Frank's diary when I was ten. According to Sharon LaFraniere, the article's author, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) "estimates in a new report that 11 million children under 15 in sub-Saharan Africa have lost at least one parent to AIDS. About a third of them have lost both parents. By 2010, Unicef predicts, AIDS will have claimed at least one of the parents of 15 percent of the region's children--20 million in all." [The New York Times, 12/24/03] Ms. LaFraniere goes on to explain:

The social implications are enormous, Unicef and other relief organizations say. Orphans are more likely to drop out of school, to suffer from chronic malnutrition, to live on the street to be exploited by adults, to turn to prostitution or other forms of crime and to themselves become infected with H.L.V., the virus that causes AIDS.

As the article continues to tell us, the AIDS epidemic is straining African resources to the brink. Though African social traditions dictate that relatives should take orphans in, the intact families which remain are so overextended that they are beginning to turn their orphaned relatives away. And African countries lack the infrastructure and social services to alleviate suffering on so large a scale.

What does it mean for us to live in a world where there are now 11 million AIDS orphans and there will soon be 20 million? It is hard to imagine so much tragedy. In America, we do better with smaller numbers. Three thousand people died in the attacks of September 11, 2001, and we rightly have marshaled all our resources to honor their memories and support their families. But at least that many children die of starvation every day around the world, many of them in sub-Saharan Africa. It's not that we don't care; it's that the numbers are so big that we have a hard time getting our heads around them. In current-day Africa

we are confronting a human and moral crisis that transcends even our ability to talk about it. But we must talk about it. As people who live lives of abundance and generosity, how are we to respond?

III.

I am not a preacher who is prone to taking up every social issue which comes across my consciousness. But I believe the church has a vital role in responding to this crisis. The plight of children has always been the church's business. And this African AIDS crisis is something of another order. By 2010, 20 million African children will be orphaned by this disease. If we in the west do not do something, we will witness escalating suffering and death on an almost unimaginable scale. If we in the west do not do something the future of sub-Saharan Africa itself will be in jeopardy. Who, in the next generations, will be left to run those countries? If we in the west do not do something, an entire continent will be a social and moral disaster area. We cannot stand by and watch that happen.

We have just emerged from a holiday season in which we have lavished every possible good thing on the children and grandchildren around us. Tomorrow those kids will return to safe and excellent schools. Only Ebenezer Scrooge would begrudge them that. But on this Second Sunday after Christmas, our gospel calls us to consider the fate and safety of children beyond our own community. To follow a God who is revealed to us as this child Jesus is to follow a God who asks us to have compassion on all children. To follow a God whose first experience of human life is the flight into Egypt is to follow a God who calls us into action for all those children in the world who suffer at the hands of political, economic, and social realities which they had no hand in making. To follow a God who was the target of Herod's wrath is to follow One who knows that the test of our morality and compassion is not how we treat the Herods of this world, but how we treat the children.

I have been here at the Redeemer long enough to know that the core of this parish lies in its generosity and compassion. The Redeemer has long seen generous outreach as central to its mission. We are a community which has, over our long history, given generously to mission and ministry in the city, in our own community, in the world. As 2004 dawns, I believe that God is now calling us to take that generosity and compassion to another level. As my friend Bill Rankin, the President of Global AIDS Interfaith Alliance who preached here last Lent says, a dollar goes a long way in Africa. I believe that we have an opportunity,

as a faith community, to put our love for children and our generosity into action:

I believe that we have the resources and the institutional relationships to make a real difference in African children's lives. I believe that God is calling us to adopt an AIDS orphanage in Southern Africa, to forge an alliance with or perhaps even start a new home which would attempt to respond, in some small yet meaningful way, to the social tragedy of the millions of children orphaned by this disease. We cannot save the adults who are dying of this disease now. We cannot save every child who will be orphaned by this disease in the future. But we can begin, now, to join hands with the children of the next generation in Africa. In caring for them, we will be extending our care for our own children. In caring for them, we will be witnessing to our respect for the dignity of human nature, wonderfully made in creation, and more wonderfully restored in the life and witness of Jesus Christ.

I know there is suffering closer to home. I know there are other things we could be doing. But we cannot look on passively at an enormous human tragedy and do nothing. This kind of mission calls on what is deepest and best about our tradition as a community of faith. At our January meeting, I will ask the Vestry that we make the adoption of a Southern African AIDS orphanage our highest priority for our mission in 2004. I ask each of you to join me in this hard but vital and transformative work. Amen.