

Second Sunday after Christmas  
Psalm 84, Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a, Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23  
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There is no better feeling at the end of a long day than turning out the bedside light, pulling the covers up close around your head, adjusting your head just right on the pillow and closing your eyes for the night. There is no worse feeling than, after you're all tucked in, to remember you forgot to take a pill, lock a door or take the dog out.

In Matthew's version of the Christmas story we just heard, Joseph has to get up twice in the middle of the night and move his little family. We can understand the urgency the first time when King Herod is plotting to eliminate any threats to his throne, but why the necessity to get up and out in short order the second time when the holy family is no longer threatened?

The missing verses in today's gospel reading describe King Herod's attempt to kill the one born King of the Jews. He sends troops to Bethlehem and the surrounding region with orders to kill all the children two years old or younger. In our church calendar, December 28<sup>th</sup> is the day each year when the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem are remembered.

It doesn't take long for "Oh little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie" to be rocked by Herod's storm troopers bringing misery and woe to the sacred birthplace of our Lord and Savior. Furthermore, Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus will be refugees for a while in Egypt. How quickly our Christmas peace is interrupted by news of another tragic plane crash and the loss of more innocent lives. The harsh reality of evil will always rear its ugly head on this side of heaven. It's essential to remember that in Jesus, we always have the victory and an eternal home where sin, suffering and death will be no more.

If Mary is the heroine of Luke's gospel with her assent to be God's humble servant and bearer of the Christ child, Joseph is clearly the champion in Matthew. Whereas Mary is visited only once by the angel Gabriel in accepting her responsibility to be the mother of God, Joseph has three dreams in which angels give him his marching orders. We heard two of his midnight messages today. Earlier in the gospel, before the birth, Joseph is told in a dream not to divorce pregnant Mary, but to take her as his wife. The child conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit, and Joseph is to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

Mary is the birth giver while Joseph is the guardian and protector. Joseph's obedience insures that Jesus survives infancy, has a human father, a normal childhood and a useful trade in adulthood. Both Mary and Joseph are vital to the fulfillment of God's plan. Each has his or her crucial role to play just as we do today.

While Jesus is the bright shining star, he may never have reached such celestial heights without Mary and Joseph, two ordinary human beings. Maybe they were chosen because they were faithful, alert, and not distracted by worldly goods or ambitions. Each day we have opportunities to serve God in far less dramatic ways as loving parents, faithful spouses, volunteers, and as employers and employees. Who knows how many lives we help save every day without our even knowing it just because we tried to love our neighbor as ourselves?

Mary and Joseph got pretty specific and undeniable angelic communiqués. Those were simpler times for sure, but I am convinced that God still speaks if we want to hear. It always helps to live lives less crowded and cluttered without all the newest gadgets. Who really needs to watch TV or movies on a screen the size of a playing card?

A New Year's resolution might be to spend less time plugged in and more time listening for the divine. What can we do better this year to protect, guard and nurture our faith just as Joseph did for the young Jesus?

Scholars that study the gospels draw parallels between this portion of the infancy narrative in Matthew and the Exodus event in the Hebrew Scriptures. "Out of Egypt, I have called my son..." is a quote from the prophet Hosea. It refers to the Exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. Hosea uses "son" here to refer to the whole people of Israel. The first Israel came into the Promised Land after an escape from Egypt and the cruelty of Pharaoh, the Egyptian king. Remember when he ordered the killing of all the first born sons of the Jews? Moses was saved by being placed in a basket of reeds after some quick thinking by his mother.

Jesus might have been killed by a later king, Herod, except he is saved by an angel's message to Joseph and his quick action. After a brief sojourn in Egypt, Joseph is told it is now safe to return to Israel. This time God's only begotten son, Jesus, is called out of Egypt.

Biblical history is repeating itself. Might Matthew want a predominantly Jewish readership to see these striking parallels and conclude that Jesus is both the new Moses and the new Israel? Moses doesn't quite reach the Promised Land, but Jesus will return to Nazareth. The people of Israel were disobedient over and over, but Jesus will be the perfect, obedient son without sin.

If we only read Luke's gospel, we'd know that Mary and Joseph were originally from Nazareth. If we only read Matthew's gospel, we'd know that Mary and Joseph were originally from Bethlehem and only later moved to Nazareth to avoid another evil King ruling in the region of their home town. According to Matthew then, as I said earlier, Mary, Joseph and Jesus were refugees, displaced by violence, who had to resettle in a foreign country for an unknown period of time.

Today alone in Syria, there are 6 million refugees having fled the chaos there. We have children from Central America in the U.S. who have fled violence in their countries of origin. What should be our response?

We can imagine that Mary, Joseph and Jesus found safe refuge in Egypt and later welcome in Nazareth. Welcoming the stranger, providing hospitality is a Biblical imperative and part of our mission statement to provide Hope, Healing and Hospitality.

St. Paul, writing to the Ephesians, reminds us that we are adopted sons and daughters of God not having been part of the original chosen people. On this last Sunday in the Christmas season, we are grateful that Jesus came from Israel and Judaism to expand the family of God to include all people regardless of our country of origin or bloodline.

We often talk about our faith as a journey. In today's gospel, Mary, Joseph and Jesus do plenty of travelling. In this new year, whether we travel far and wide or stay close to home, may our goal be to reach new places of the heart, experiencing expanded heights and depths of compassion, service and generosity. AMEN.