

Second Sunday of Christmas

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

January 3, 2016

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"It's beginning to *feel* a lot like Christmas..." as the temperatures finally return to normal for this time of year, except that we're now two weeks after our lovely pageant and more than a week beyond December 25th. If your tree is still up, the lights are still in the windows and your wreath is on the door, that's perfectly okay because the liturgical Christmas season continues for a few more days.

I do hope the long weekends and extended school vacations allowed for peace and good will to pervade your homes and your hearts with time spent among family and friends. Other than being found out and kindly admonished by a national park officer, on Christmas Day, in the closed National Battlefield, Juanita and I thoroughly enjoyed our Christmas holiday.

How we cherish returning to Bethlehem each year for a brief moment. It is perhaps the purist and most innocent place on earth with Jesus away in a manger asleep on the hay, with Mary, Joseph, the animals, angels and shepherds silently and adoringly hovering close by.

The promise of perfect love and world peace is realized for that all too brief an instant, and how we want it for ourselves, our families and our world.

Tomorrow life will return to normal for most of us as it's back to a full work week and school. Today in our gospel, life turns to the unthinkable for Mary, Joseph and Jesus. Herod the Great raises his ugly head against the child, Jesus.

Wise men and a star alert the insecure, jealous, power-hungry and brutal king that danger looms nearby in the little town of Bethlehem. Joseph's only option is to take his family and run for it after being warned of the threat by God's angel in a dream. The peace and good will of that Christmas is quickly shattered. Jesus is spared but other families in Bethlehem won't escape Herod's ruthlessness.

Unfortunately, this is true every Christmas as some families always suffer during each holy season. This year a 12-year-old girl was fatally shot in Richmond, numerous Americans lost their homes and lives from flooding and tornadoes and one of our parishioners lost her adult daughter to a courageous fight with cancer.

Matthew would remind us, if we don't already know it too well, that we don't live in a perfect world. The likes of Herod still reign in the individuals and organizations that can't stand and won't abide people who are different from them.

Jesus' life, according to Matthew, will begin and end in violence. Herod yanked Jesus around and forced the holy family to become a hunted family. Pilate yanked Jesus around and fixed him on a cross.

Did God make it hard for Jesus from the beginning because God knew it would only get worse later on? No lengthy coddling for God's son. No easy childhood in Bethlehem among aunts, uncles, cousins and playmates. Jesus would know himself first to be a refugee living among strangers. As he would say later when he was an adult, "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." He would never be comfortably at home in this world.

Matthew has further theological motives for having Jesus spend time in Egypt. Just as the original Israelites once lived there and came to the Promised Land after great struggle, so, too, would Jesus, the savior of Israel, come from there to bring the promise of new life in the spirit. Matthew quotes the prophet Hosea, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

Just as God was faithful to Moses and the first Israel, God sees that Jesus survives his sojourn across the Sinai Wilderness and on to Nazareth some years later. Subsequently, Jesus will tell his disciples that their lives won't always be easy if they choose to follow him. He did say that they would experience abundant life, however, and that he would never forsake them.

As we look ahead to a new year, 2016, we pray for the best and especially that we can remain faithful regardless of whatever new challenges may present themselves.

Philip Gulley, a Christian writer and author of a book called Front Porch Tales, tells of a certain neighbor, Dr. Gibbs, whom he grew up next to. Gulley remembers that Dr. Gibbs smiled a lot and never minded Philip and his friends playing in his yard.

When Dr. Gibbs wasn't saving lives, he was planting trees on his 10-acre plot of land. His goal was to make it into a forest. Dr. Gibbs came from the "no pain, no gain" school of tree husbandry. After planting and watering the young saplings, he never watered them again.

Once when the author asked why, Dr. Gibbs told him that over watering plants spoiled them. Too much water and the tree would only grow shallow roots. Otherwise, the trees would send down deep roots in search of moisture. He didn't mind weeding out the weaker trees early on to encourage future generations of strong survivors.

Dr. Gibbs died a few years after the author left home, but when he returns, he marvels at the robust forest that he watched Dr. Gibbs plant years before. He wrote of those trees that "...they wake up in the morning, beat their chests and drink their coffee black."

Later in the same chapter, the author writes about trees he had planted recently. He says he carried water to them for a solid summer. He sprayed them, fertilized them and prayed for

them. Two years of coddling produced trees that expected to be waited on hand and foot, he writes. Whenever a cold wind blew in, they'd tremble and chatter their branches. He described them as "sissy trees."

Funny thing about the trees he remembered Dr. Gibbs planted – adversity and deprivation seemed to benefit them in ways comfort and ease never could.

Every night before the author went to bed, he would check in on his two sons. He would stand over them and watch the rising and falling of the life within their little bodies. Mostly, he said, he prayed that they would be spared hardship, but after thinking about Dr. Gibbs hearty forest back in his hometown, he has changed his prayer.

Prayers to avoid all hardship, he now thinks, are naïve, for tough times are inevitable one way or another. Violent winds will blow, tyrants will come and go, and even men and women of good will make mistakes.

The question for Gulley and all of us then is, will our roots be deeply and firmly set in a God who came to us at Christmas with the promise of Emmanuel – God with us at all times and in all places and circumstances – in Bethlehem, Egypt or the desert in between?

Maybe our New Year's resolution for 2016 could be to make it our top priority to grow deeper roots in the knowledge and love of Jesus the Christ through prayer, study, service and a minimum of hard times so that we can weather faithfully whatever lies ahead. AMEN.