

Second Sunday After Christmas
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
St. Francisville, LA

1/5/2020

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

There is still a feeling of Christmas around this town. The beautiful lights are still on, many of us are just now beginning to take down our Christmas trees, some of us are still in a vacation mode, schools have not resumed classes, and we haven't yet celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany. I quite love this prolonged feeling of Christmas. In fact, I went to a Parishioner's home last night, after arriving from vacation, and she was playing a Hallmark Christmas classic, and her nativity scene was still prominently displayed on her fireplace mantle.

It almost looks like our Lectionary writers want us to stay in a Christmas mood just a bit longer. We have a passage from Matthew which ironically falls before Epiphany, yet starts with the words, "After the Wise Men had left..." The passage gives tells us about two different dreams Joseph received. Both sections follow the same basic structure: (a) An Angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream, (b) the Angel gives a warning or command, (c) Joseph obeys the Angel's command, (d) both passages end by stating the action taken by the family "fulfills Scripture." Through both of the dreams, the reader also encounters a clear contrast between the new born King and the current Hasmonian ruler.

The first dream occurs in Jerusalem. The Angel's message is "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." We are then told that Joseph did as instructed and this fulfills the Scripture, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

The second dream takes place in Egypt when Herod died (4 B.C.) The Angel says, "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." As in the first dream, Joseph obeyed the Angel and went back to Israel and settled in Nazareth, which fulfills the Scripture, "He will be called a Nazorean."

We could preach several sermons here: Dream one and the connections between this passage and the Exodus experience of the people of God, the similarities between Moses and Jesus, the interplay between the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant, etc. Dream two and the theme of fulfillment. So far in Matthew everything that has happened to Jesus fulfills Scriptures. We could discuss every allusion to arrive at the conclusion that the Jewish Scripture points to Jesus, who fulfills many of its aspirations and promises. Or we could preach many other sermons about dreams, obedience, the socio-political context of Jesus' early years, etc.

I find myself thinking about the lost verses. What happened in between the two dreams? Can we find the lesson for today by reviewing these verses? Of course, the answer is "Yes!" Those verses are the infamous massacre of the innocent male children in Bethlehem. "When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi."

What follows the birth of our Messiah is not an idyllic vacation to an exotic destination, which fulfills Scripture and allows the joy of Christmas to be extended for a few more years. What follows the birth of the Messiah is tragedy! I can picture the wails of the parents as their children are being slaughtered, the incomprehensible grief, the anger at an oppressive regime intent on eliminating anything and anyone who might challenge its power or thwart their political agenda. What follows Christmas is darkness and human suffering of great proportions. In fact, this is how Matthew sees these events. He states that this massacre fulfills what was written in the prophet Jeremiah, "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

The two dreams in Bethlehem and Egypt bookend this tragic episode and I believe this is very representative of our Christian life. Let me illustrate this for a moment. As all of you know, I enjoy going on retreats once a year. Alone in the beautiful woods of the Solomon center I can commune with God and nature in profound ways. I often feel great peace and joy as I listen intently to the voice of God. To use a metaphor you all know well, it is almost as though these retreats allow me an epiphany of God. I love these intimate encounters so much that I often wish I could remain at the mountain top just a little longer. I often want to build three dwelling places as Peter wanted to do at the mount of Transfiguration. But, life is lived in the valley. We can't stay at the mountain top. We must contend with reality as it is, in our own context, and we must be faithful to God whatever we happen to be.

This is what happens to the young family and to those unsuspecting villagers in Bethlehem after Christmas. The family is forced to become immigrants, displaced from home and family, foreigners in a land unfamiliar to them. As an immigrant who came to this country at the age of 20, I can tell you that adapting to a new home is extremely difficult. You don't know the language, the food tastes strange to you, the streets you walk on are not your streets, and the people you meet are not your people. Your support system nearly disappears overnight and you experience profound loneliness and a sense of isolation. Yet, for the sake of your family and your own mental health you must adapt. You must learn the language and accept the food. You must build a community over time and you must combat the sense of isolation common to all immigrants. The choices for you are limited. You either adapt to your new normal, or you go back to face whatever darkness you left behind. This is life in the valley.

In a real way, we all will be dealing with life in the valley this week. The children are gone back home, the house feels indescribably empty, and the brief respite from the daily stressors of our lives is over, at least for a while. It is so easy for us to look back to Bethlehem and the excitement of new birth, visitors, gifts, and joy. It is so easy to look back to the time when we were 20 and were full of vigor, strength, creativity, and idealism. Remember that fire in our hearts? Remember that idealism and burning desire to change the world? Remember the fun, the parties, the joy of discovery and the excitement of new relationships? Life was good back home, back in the day, back when we were 20! And then, we look at our present reality, at our aging bodies, at our empty homes, at the multiple pills we must take daily... and we wonder what happened to it all.

The good news for us today is that the second dream takes place in Egypt. What this means is that God was as present with the young family in Bethlehem as he was present with them in Egypt. In fact, God remained with them throughout their journey of displacement and their journey of return. It is likewise with us. God is as present in our lives today as he was back when we were 20. And this Jesus who was an immigrant

knows the hardships of life in the valley. He knows what it feels like to suffer, and he has become our refuge at times of need.

I pray that you will experience the comfort and joy of knowing God is with you today, even in the midst of whatever you are dealing with. God loves you and will never abandon you. God still shows up in dreams, but, most importantly, God shows up in the many people you encounter in your life everyday. Be at peace, therefore! Allow yourself to experience the joy into which God has called his children.

May you be blessed this day. Amen!