

The Flight of Faith
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Readings: Isaiah 63:7-9
Matthew 2:13-23

The First Sunday after Christmas - December 26, 2010

Matthew 2:13-23

¹³Now 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." ¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and 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."

¹⁶When 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. ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸"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."

¹⁹When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰"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." ²¹Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²But 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. ²³There 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."

'Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house,
not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.
The children were all snuggled in their beds with care,
in hopes that St Nicholas, soon would be there.

Now it is the day AFTER Christmas, and all through the house,
the crowd is sad and grouchy as an old grumpy grouse.
The tree that had been handled with O such care,
now stands in a heap of such disrepair.
O yes Jesus has come, but now he is gone,
leaving nothing to do but work - from dusk until dawn.

We are now in the "time between the times", that bridge time between Christmas and New Years. The dead time that is the "12 days of Christmas" - 12 days of ascending excitement in Europe, but 12 days of ever descending doom and post-Christmas shopping exhaustion here in America.

In Great Britain today is known as “boxing day”, a remembrance of days past when people of means all had servants, servants who had to be serving on Christmas day. The servants got the day AFTER Christmas off, and along with a day off they were presented with “boxes” of goodies and toys and maybe some shoes or whatever. That was boxing day then.

Today, December 26, the day after Christmas, is another form of “boxing day” – the day when the returns and post Christmas sales begin. Did you know research shows that actually more gifts will be exchanged in these days AFTER Christmas than the day OF Christmas?!

The festival of Christmas has that precious story of the birth of Jesus. The Epiphany Feast coming up on January 6 has that mysterious tale of the Magi. But our text for the Sunday after Christmas is about as precious as the post partum blues, and is more terrifying than it is mysterious.

After the birth of Jesus, the Magi come. Then Joseph receives another message from God - not a message of good news, but a warning. God tells Joseph his family is in danger. He is to flee to Egypt.

Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus get away just in time - for Herod inflicts a bloodbath on Israel that we call the "slaughter of the innocents" - in a futile effort

to find and kill the one who was born king of the Jews. Try telling this one on Christmas Eve!

We know so well what the evangelist Luke is trying to say in his narrative of the birth of Jesus. But what is Matthew trying to tell us through the story of the flight to Egypt?

First of all, I want to stress that I share the view of many scholars that Matthew's story of the slaughter of the innocents is a product of Matthew's literary imagination. Thank God there is no corroborating evidence that such a slaughter took place! So why would Matthew exercise his poetic license and insert such a story?

The answer is I think Matthew wants to make a clear connection between the origins of Jesus and the Christian story with THE story of the Hebrew Bible, the Exodus and deliverance of the Hebrew people from their bondage in Egypt. In other words, **THE STORY OF THE FLIGHT TO EGYPT RELATES THE JESUS STORY TO THE REST OF THE BIBLICAL STORY.**

The story of the flight links the Jesus story to the most important of all of the stories of the Hebrew Bible, the EXODUS event when God delivered his people out of bondage. The prophecy alluded to is from Hosea: "Out of Egypt have I called my son." For the ancient Jews who read Matthew's gospel, the story of Jesus gained credibility by virtue of being linked to THE STORY of the Hebrew people.

The flight story links Jesus to the past. But the flight to Egypt also suggests that in the history of God's revelation, the chapter on Jesus is going to introduce a totally NEW revelation: the ancient Hebrews were delivered FROM Egypt TO the promised land. In this story, Jesus is delivered FROM the threat of Herod in the promised land TO the safety of Egypt.

Jesus is not going to be limited by his ties to the first covenant of God with his people. Jesus and his message will not be limited to the provincialities of homeland and tribe. Jesus was to spend his earliest formative years NOT in the land God had given to the descendants of Abraham, but in a foreign, alien land.

The flight to Egypt reminds us of our "roots", reminds us that who we are is deeply embedded in that from whence we have come.

Our past is important and cannot be forgotten, cannot be undone.

We are who we are.

BUT, despite the limitations of our past, our present and future are open doors before us! We are NOT slaves to our past. As the bondage of the Hebrews was broken by God when he delivered them out of Egypt, so also our bondage to our past is broken by God's new revelation in Jesus Christ. For this one born in Bethlehem, this one who fled to Egypt, is the one who died and is risen for you, so that you may have a new beginning and new life.

The flight to Egypt relates the story of Jesus to the rest of the Biblical story.

And the flight to Egypt story reminds us that **SALVATION IS BOTH PRECIOUS AND PRECARIOUS**. Human evil threatens new life at every turn, and such evil is to be taken seriously. Perhaps you wonder, "Why did Joseph take such risks, taking his new born child and post partum wife on another long journey? Would God not protect them from Herod? Surely, God would not let his new revelation be jeopardized by a two-bit king like Herod."

Maybe so. But Joseph acted like any wise and prudent father. God HAD told him to flee, after all. But, more than that, Joseph realized the **VULNERABILITY** of this new divine/human revelation. It was not yet time for Jesus to make his purpose for the world manifest. Indeed, the story makes clear that God's new plan and new offering of himself was at risk.

So also we are reminded of the fragility of our freedom, that our new life in Christ is ever at risk, given the reality of human evil.

It is easy to make new promises to God at Christmas. In just a few days we will make "new year's resolutions". Followed by the re-discovery of how hard it is to **KEEP** those resolutions. Even commitments made during this holy season are hard to fulfill. We have the confidence that God will be faithful to us. But we also live with the reality of our own failure. Our salvation, our faith, is a most precious, yet fragile gift.

And it is this precious, fragile gift of faith that the story of the flight to

Egypt is all about.

The shepherds went to Bethlehem, the Magi traveled from the East to find the new king, Mary and Joseph took a journey first to Bethlehem, and then to Egypt, and finally back on to Nazareth. The flight story makes clear that faith is a journey, a journey through unknown territory, a pilgrimage through life.

A journey, a flight of faith.

In retracing that first journey of Jesus, we can and should find affirmation for our own life journeys. His family had to leave behind their homeland and the safety and assurance that comes from friends and familiar surroundings, for the sake of the new life in that new baby.

And so also we at times have to leave behind OUR familiar surroundings, our comfortable patterns of behavior, and convenient excuses for our unhappiness or anxiety or lack of fulfillment - for the sake of the new life offered to us in Jesus Christ. For faith, like life itself, is a process of growth, a journey, a pilgrimage. New life is a flight FROM what we ARE, TO who and what we can BECOME.

In my wife's home of Tennessee, they revere pioneers. Tennessee was settled by pioneers, men and women and boys and girls who took a journey, a journey with a special purpose. Pioneers traveled not to get to somewhere familiar, but to find someplace NEW, to pave the way for less hardy souls to follow. True pioneers did not stay anywhere very long - once civilization encroached upon

their homesteads, it was time to move on.

Mary and Joseph were pioneers like that. They traveled with a purpose. They took their trip to pave the way for others to follow. Maybe that is where the human Jesus picked up some of those traits that made him the man and savior that he was.

The author of Hebrews capitalizes on this image by calling Jesus the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith":

Jesus is the one who has shown us the way, the one who has blazed a new trail for us to follow, the one who has shown us, by example, how and why to live.

The journey of the pioneer we call Jesus did not end in Bethlehem.

As the flight story shows us, IT BEGAN THERE.

And now, by the grace of God, may YOUR flight of faith take off and soar like an eagle to new heights of joy and peace and hope and love! AMEN.