*Steadfast*

By

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Isaiah 63:7-9

I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us and the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. 8For he said, “Surely they are my people, children who will not act deceitfully,” and he became their savior 9in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and pity it was he who redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

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[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+2%3A13-23&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-23184a)] 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 magi, 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 magi.17Then what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

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[[d](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+2%3A13-23&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-23191d)] got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 22But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling 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 Nazarene*.”

In case the calendar can’t convince me, I always know we’ve come to the end of the year when the news becomes swamped with lists. Every day there is a different voice giving careful analysis on the most important stories, offering the critical developments in politics and world affairs, giving updates on economic trends. There are lists upon lists: the most important books of 2022, the top trends in kitchen design, scientific developments, lists of firsts, list of those who were lost. The lists keep coming. Tucked into those reports are an innocuous crystal ball section. It’s there where pundits and experts will add what they are looking for in the coming year. What we can expect in 2023, trying to guess what the top stories *will be*.

The report that really hit me this year was a simple one. It was on the PBS Newshour, and a small group of people were interviewed.[[1]](#footnote-1) They weren’t famous, no credentials were listed, just ordinary people. There was a college student, a small business owner, a self-described “81-year-old lady.”

They shared their reflections on the past year. Their highs were so incredibly relatable: voting for the first time, moving, celebrating a niece getting into college, a son visiting for the first time in years, a mother’s depression lifted. Their lows were equally familiar: lost relationships, impossible job searches, struggles with finding enough time or the resources they need. Major news stories intersected with lived experiences as they described hurricanes they survived, gun violence in their hometowns, and the horror of watching as wars began.

Their words weren’t polished, but they were real. Real people with real lives, trying to weave together the good and the bad and the ambiguous of a year past and ponder what a year ahead could mean. They all have plans for what next will bring, but there is a certain knowing as they list their hopes around trips, jobs, business ventures, health, and new beginnings. There was a sense of understanding that those plans will change.

This isn’t a 21st Century problem. As long as people have been able to count on fingers, or toes, or etch something down on rock or paper, we’ve been making lists of what we should do and planning out what ought to happen. As long as people have been people, we have tried to control the future with orderly lists and well executed plans. Mary and Joseph were no exception, they too had plans. What scant information the Gospel of Matthew gives us, tells us that they were planners. They had planned a wedding—*that changed.* They had settled into a nice little house in Bethlehem-- the school district was great, it was an easy commute to Jerusalem. They liked small town life. They were starting out as a new family, still trying to make sense of the past year. They were still working out which cry means hungry and how exactly swaddling clothes work. It’s there as Mary and Joseph are trying to step into this new life and identity that strangers arrived on their doorstep. It doesn’t say if Mary and Joseph ever noticed the star shining overhead, or if they were just too busy with a new baby to pay attention to heavenly portents.

Before they had the opportunity to put away the strange gifts offered, reality sets in. The magi realize the danger and go home by “another road.” Joseph receives another late-night angelic announcement—this time telling him to flee with his wife and newborn.

It is another turning; another moment when Mary and Joseph’s world is turned on its head, another moment when their proposed trajectory shifts, and they find themselves on the road with only the things that they can carry; leaving their plans behind in a neat little house in a kind little town that had been home.

It’s an uncomfortable story. It’s hard to read and it’s hard to hear. It was harder still for the family fleeing in the night; it was unimaginable for the town destroyed only days later.

Maybe they should have expected it: after all God had told them that this baby was special, that he was God’s own Son, the Messiah, the Lord.Those titles must come with some degree of danger. Maybe they assumed that they would have time to figure out how to raise a baby before dealing with the pressure of messianic expectations. They didn’t get that time. I wonder if the weight of those words: savior, messiah, and king sounded hollow as they fled. I wonder if they tried to make sense of it. If Mary whispered to the baby, “We are just like the prophet Uriah, and Jeremiah, and the high priest Onias finding refuge in a new land.” They would have been on the road with others, equally wary of Herod’s rule, others searching out something better in neighboring Egypt. I wonder if they shared tips on how to take care of a newborn in such circumstances. Those stories don’t make it into scripture.

Maybe the violence shouldn’t come as a shock. It’s set up just a few verses earlier when Herod is terrified at the Magi’s arrival and publicly challenged as stars and prophets seem to align against him. Herod wasn’t known for his constraint. No, he was known for his violence. Even the Roman emperors wrote about how capricious he was about how dangerous he was to the people he was set to govern.

You won’t be surprised that in Christian Tradition we have tried to clean up this particular story. We paint it with a patina of meaning and decorate it with justifications. Matthew starts that process as he carefully adds scripture references to each stage of Jesus’ journey. We can call this meaning making or the benefit of hindsight, but it’s Matthew struggling. Struggling to explain the story he received. To explain why such tragedy would accompany the birth of the savior. He’s holding two stories in tension: on the one hand the beauty of the star, and the kings, and gifts, and in the other the ugly reality that met the Christ Child—death, destruction, fear.

In the early church, there were apocryphal stories of the flight to Egypt. They included palm trees bowing down to present the Holy Family with a good meal, leopards wagging their trails, and lions kneeling reverently before the child. I’d like to read more of those stories in scripture, but they’re not there. Matthew doesn’t include them. There is nothing to soften the reality of a family’s flight and a community’s devastation.

Modern historians and biblical scholars struggle with this one. Some just want to throw it out. Arguing that it’s too much; it couldn’t possibly be true. Others offer sage, if not difficult, analysis. Considering the population of Bethlehem and the history of Herod’s rule, hurting children wouldn’t have been that far from the mark; so unremarkable as to not even warrant a note in the news, not even a passing remark.

But you and I know something that maybe scholars, and church fathers, and those who try to make the story neat and tidy sometimes can forget-- this is unimaginable, but not an exceptional story. Everyday people must leave their homes in the middle of the night, afraid and vulnerable uncertain of their destination. Sometimes it is a storm, sometimes it is danger arriving with sirens and warnings, sometimes it is danger within the four walls where they live. Sometimes it is a world event or another capricious ruler who robs them of the gift of good night’s sleep. Jesus is no exception here; Jesus is taking part in a story that families, holy or not, experience day in and day out. Jesus flees in the arms of his mother, afraid and uncertain.

We know that children should be safe, but that is not always the reality. There are dangers facing the most vulnerable among us. The violence, sadly, that too is not particularly exceptional. Violence against children is overlooked and underreported, a sad story that can escape the news. Sure, we’ll name them as martyrs after the fact, but that doesn’t change that child who should be safe and cherished is no more.

*F*or me, no scriptural references or cold statistic make those two realities any more palatable in the 1st century than they are today. So why does Matthew include this story? Why does your associate pastor think “I know… this is the passage for New Year’s Day!”

When the angel first appears to Joseph in Matthew’s gospel, the angel says the baby’s name will be Jesus and he will save the people from their sins; but the first title the angel gives is “Emmanuel.” Matthew doesn’t leave it to chance hoping that his readers would know the Hebrew meaning of that name. He defines it for them: “Emmanuel: God with us.” The rest of the story makes good on that first promise. That *this* child, *this Jesus,* is indeed “God with Us.”

God with us in the midst of everything—even the unimaginable, the unconscionable.

“God with us” isn’t some sort of mystical title for Jesus, but a reality. God entered into human history, out history, not with power, but with humanity and humility. God became flesh, not Achilles dipped in the waters of the Styx; not even Moses drawn from the Nile and raised as a prince; but as a baby born to Joe and Mary out in Bethlehem. They were names that wouldn’t draw attention on a tax register in a town that had famous past and a rather dull present.

But there, there God chooses to be. Right there, God experienced the unimaginable, cradled in the arms of his parents in the dark of the night. But there’s more to the story than the unimaginable.

 If God is with us in the unimaginable, it also means God is with us in the forgettable. Think of all the verses that are left out. All the things that happen between the fleeing and the returning. Like all babies, there would have been milestones to celebrate or tolerate. A first smile, a first “No,” the moment when hands could finally reach to Joseph’s workbench and the dangers that came with that. The moment when Mary and Joseph debated which town in Galilee, and the complaints on the trip, “are we there yet?” Those stories that didn’t make it into scripture. But through Jesus, God was present in those moments too. “With” doesn’t have any modifiers. God with us.

That is the incarnation: Jesus dwelling with us in human form and experience. It is a new way for God to be with us, but it is also just a different take on a well-established practice. God has always chosen to be with humanity. It is one of the mysteries of our faith. We worship a God who chooses us before we take any action.

The passage we read from Isaiah is part of a longer song reminding the people returning from exile of what God had done for them in generation past. They don’t sing about a peaceable kingdom or a far-off future, there are no references to what will be; but rather they tell the story of what was. How God saved the people. They sing about God, not angels or messengers, who accompanied them through exile and exodus, homecoming and harvests, famine, and flood.

It is a testimony that Gods’ presence is steadfast; that God’s love is steadfast and enduring. It is a whispered remembrance that it was God who was so close as to carry the people when the way gets too hard.

That is the promise—no matter what a year may bring; whether it makes it into the news or not; if it’s just a moment in your story, this is the promise: God will be with us. God will not leave us. That’s what it means to follow Emmanuel:

God with Us… not when everything is worked out, but in the working out of everything.

God with Us… in the middle of the night when we don’t know if we should flee or freeze or just throw our hands in the air.

God with us when the powers of this world threaten and scream and rage and hurt and destroy.

God with us when we cradle a newborn child and see only possibility.

God with us when we pack up and begin something new.

God with us when we make our lists and draw up our plans and take steps.

God is with us when we break bread and share the cup.

God is with us when we walk out these doors in the bright blue skies of this new year.

God with us.

Or as the Apostle Paul wrote so clearly: “For nothing in all of creation can keep us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.”

God’s story is that of a steadfast love that endures, that can stretch far back into history sheltering and guiding and stretch so far into the future we cannot escape it. It is a promise that God is right here. God’s love is a steadfast presence that does not shrink away; but draws ever closer. God’s presence is with us, at the dawn of a new year, and all the days ahead.

Amen.

1. PBS Newshour December 30th, “2022 in Review” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)