

Flight to Egypt

The Reverend Harold A. Jackson, Jr.
Preached at the San Dimas Community Church
United church of Christ
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The First Sunday after Christmas, Matthew 2: 13-23

It has been less than a week that we celebrated the birth of the Christ child and tried to ponder the significance of it all. Every year we go through the same process of receiving God's gift of salvation to us and the world; and every year as we meditate on the outgrowth of this process—birth, salvation, life anew—, we are struck by the fact that the full meaning of it all still seems to escape us.

As we are just about able to ascertain the intention of what God is doing in our lives through the baby Jesus, the divine gift takes flight—gone, flees, vanishes. A band of astrologers, of whom you may find more about next Sunday, inquire of Herod the King of the Jews where lies the King of the Jews. There seems to be a problem here, a king that sits upon the throne of earthly majesty and a king that lies in a trough where donkeys feed. Herod the King of the Jews does not understand the situation and thus becomes concerned that a usurper will come to destroy the House of Herod, and his children will not inherit what he so painfully and ruthlessly established.

Both the wise men from the east and Joseph, baby Jesus' father, are warned in dreams of what Herod's intention was. So, they took flight. The magi fled to their respective countries another way from which they came and Joseph and his family fled to Egypt.

Perhaps, Matthew the gospel writer is playing with our minds and wants us to remember that the Hebrews in the time of Jacob had to flee from their homeland to Egypt in order to escape a famine. They fled there to save a remnant of God's chosen people. They fled because they were beset upon with the fear of starvation. They had to flee to Egypt for fear of their lives. Later when the pharaoh who was a friend of Joseph died and another was installed, they again had to flee, this time from Egypt, in fear of their lives. Thus by taking flight, they were able to begin the task of establishing themselves as God's Chosen People.

If you remember, the Egyptian sojourn of the Hebrews began with Joseph, the son of Jacob, who had to, in a manner of speaking, flee from his brothers who hated him and

vowed to kill him. Joseph feared for his life, but God intervened and he is bought and then sold by slave traders to pharaoh's chief administrator in Egypt.

Now we have another Joseph. Matthew is cognizant of this and skillfully weaves his story to connect with the Old Testament story of yesteryear. The hatred of Herod is such that he orders all male children two years and under to be put to death. Therefore, this Joseph flees from the wrath of Herod in fear of his life and the life of his family, especially the baby Jesus.

However, Matthew is not concerned with Joseph fleeing because he fears for his life. Matthew is concerned that the listener and the reader understand that fear has nothing to do with Joseph's flight to Egypt. Indeed Joseph may have been scared to death, but the events that are put into motion are God's doing. I imagine that in Genesis, young Joseph feared that death was imminent; Matthew reminds us in the story of the New Testament Joseph that when God is involved all things work together for good. As YHWH destined the movements of the Joseph of old, YHWH also preordained the events in the life of Jesus' father Joseph. Surely the people who were hearers of Matthew's gospel recalled the words of Joseph in Genesis, "You intended it for evil. God intended it for good."

This is the Christmas story. We are familiar with the story where the gospels of Matthew and Luke are combine and an artificial converging takes place. Shepherds and wise men appeared together. A star shines brightly above them. We rejoice. But, this is neither Matthew's nor Luke's story.

Matthew is not concerned with all the hoopla of announcing the birth of Jesus. The only announcement is quietly made by an angel to Joseph that his betroth has been impregnated by the Holy Spirit, the child will save the world, and his coming was to fulfill what the prophet declared, "Emmanuel, God with us." There is no travel to Bethlehem for a census taking and no denial of a sheltered place in which to stay. Matthew's only concerned is that in a world filled with despair God is with us.

Although God is with us in Matthew's view, we are haunted by the despair of the moment—Matthew's moment. From Matthew's point of view, we cannot rejoice. We should not rejoice. To sing the song "Joy to the World, the Lord Is Come" for Matthew would have been risky business. This Emmanuel who is to save the world is naively reported by the magi to be the King of the Jews to one who is King of the Jews. From the papers of Josephus, we find that in Herod we are confronted with a maniacal ruler. It is said that he killed his wife and had three of his sons executed. No one was safe, certainly not a baby. It was Herod who was responsible for what is known as the "slaughter of the innocents."

No wonder Joseph fled to Egypt. He probably did not need the warning of an angel. There were frightful signs all around that Herod meant business, bloody business. This is the birth story of Jesus. Are you ready to celebrate? Can you imagine mothers weeping and wailing for their slain children? And, we worry about getting toys for our children. Matthew intensifies the situation by reminding Jews of Jeremiah's report of Rachel in Ramah who could not be consoled on account of her children being slain. Christmas anyone?

The slaughter of the innocents takes place, but Jesus escapes. His return, therefore, symbolizes his special place in the divine plan for salvation. Whereas the return of the Hebrews from Egypt made clear that they were God's chosen people, Jesus' return signifies that he was God's chosen one. This was essential because the chosen people could not live up to "chosenness" and be faithful to God's admonition to Abraham to be a blessing to themselves and all nations.

Herod who thought that he could control all events was not able to interrupt the divine plan put in place by God with us. Matthew's gospel makes us aware that Jesus' coming and teaching was a disruption in things as they are to things that they can become. It reminds me of the words of George Bernard Shaw:

Some men see things as they are and ask why.

Others dream things that never were and ask why not.

I suppose that is what Christmas should really be about. The tinsel, the bright lights, and the expensive gifts are ornamental things that hide the real meaning of God with us. It does not really matter that the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke are different. It does matter, however, that we understand Emmanuel, God with us.

Let us be wise and join the magi band seeking, finding, reflecting, and then make a turn in a new spiritual direction. That is why we beat a path to Bethlehem every year. It ain't easy. It's risky. Yet, it has to be done.

Matthew challenges us to look at the birth of Jesus in a way unsimilar to that which we ever did before. There is a reason that he mentions the lamentation of Rachel in Ramah during the Babylonian exile and the slaying of all male children less than two years of age at the hands of Herod. Homiletics magazine says, "Matthew put these inexplicable deaths at the center of this exile story for one reason. When Jesus returns from his Egyptian exile,

it will not be to take on some small-potato bad guy like Herod. It will be to destroy death itself.”

Let us hope this will continue to be the case. Perhaps it will be up to each one of us as we struggle to find new meaning in the Christmas event as mothers still wail and lament for their slain children in Iraq killed by bombs and listed as collateral damage, in Compton from drive-by shootings, and in Darfur from genocidal attacks.

Yes, the one who gives light will also destroy the place where death dwells, darkness. In Jesus the Christ dwells life. That is what Christmas is about. Christ was born into the world to rid the world of darkness. Jesus the light of the world shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Amen.

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