

Matthew 2:13-23 (NRSV)

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

When 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. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

"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."

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

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Sunday after Christmas marks a return to “ordinary life.” The shopping is done, the presents are opened, and blood sugar returns to less than catastrophic levels. Even if there are probably still some exchanges to be made and some New Year’s Eve parties to attend, we begin to contemplate life after Christmas, ordinary life.

Today’s Gospel arrives to tell us that, for Christians, there **is** no ordinary life. The reading begins right after the wise men have packed up to head on home. They return home “by another way” because they have been warned in a dream not to return to Herod. Already the brokenness of the world impinges on the blessed scene in the manger that we celebrated just last Monday. The world is never far behind Jesus *or* his disciples, then as now. If the message of Christmas is to tell us that the Savior has come, the message of this first Sunday of Christmas tells us why that’s so important, why the world needs this Savior so very much.

The wise men didn’t know why they were being warned away from Herod – this becomes clear in today’s lesson. We know from Matthew that Herod is frightened of the advent of the Christ child – in fact, the text tells us that all of Jerusalem was frightened. We don’t really know why. It may be that Herod and the city are put on edge by the announcement that this child would become the king of the Jews and rival to their own rule. It may be that the actions of God are always disturbing to people in charge.

But now we find that Herod acts on that fear by launching a preemptive strike. He sends down to Bethlehem to slaughter all the children 2 and under. His wise men haven’t confirmed the presence of God’s weapon of mass salvation, but Herod goes ahead anyway, so afraid he is. When we act from fear, children die, then as now. When we respond in fear, mothers weep and won’t be consoled, then as now. When we lash out because of fear, lives are dislocated and people become refugees, then as now.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph had become refugees, stateless persons. Jesus is not *in* Bethlehem when the slaughter occurs. An angel had come to Joseph in a dream and told him it was time to go. And so, Joseph roused the family and headed west to Egypt, to avoid the slaughter of the innocent children. Later, in another dream, Joseph is told that Herod has died and that he and Mary and Jesus should return to Israel. But, instead of returning to Bethlehem, they go to Nazareth in the Galilee, away from Archelaus.

The narrative doesn't tell us much about Mary's and Joseph's feelings. Joseph, Mary and Jesus seem to be uprooted again and again – to Egypt, back to Israel, but not to Bethlehem but rather to the wild areas around the sea of Galilee. Weren't they scared? They're homeless refugees one step ahead of Herod, living among strangers in foreign lands? I sure would be. All this uprooting struck me a little too close to home. Linda and I have moved a couple of times in the past few years, and while we are starting to feel at home here, that feeling of dislocation is one we still recognize too well.

And I know that there are people in this congregation who are grappling with the idea of moving in the near future. And I know that every time you walk into the doctor's office for your annual physical or into your boss's office amid rumors of the latest restructuring or you get a call from a sick relative, well, any number of life-changing events, you're looking at being uprooted in just the ways that the Holy Family is in this passage.

We live in a very mobile area where people come and go very quickly. Jobs change, lives change. Just as an experiment, think for a moment about how you have moved or been uprooted. What happened? What did it feel like? How long did it take before you felt OK in your new surroundings? And how confident are you that you will be living where you are now in five years?

<Wait>

Being uprooted is painful and disruptive. And yet, the people of God are frequently uprooted, sometimes by the demands of the world, and sometimes by the demands of God. We would like to think that the people of God are immune to the buffetings of fate, of illness, of the economy, but that's just not true. It wasn't true for Mary and Joseph and young Jesus, and it isn't true for us. We'd like to believe that the demands of God will work conveniently into our plans, maybe require a bit more kindness to strangers, a bit more reflection, maybe coming to church more often. But sometimes God just hits you like a ton of bricks and tells you it's time. It's time to do something you've never done or to go someplace you've never been and aren't sure you really want to go to. As the Lutheran service of Morning Prayer tells us, "you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us."

You see, God doesn't just send us on our way, any more than God just sent the Holy Family on their way. No, God goes with, guiding and leading and supporting. In the Gospel lesson for today, we see that God is active, sending messengers and dreams to open new paths for the Holy Family. In spite of all of the moves that God requires of the Holy Family, we see that Jesus winds up where God intended him to be.

This can help us understand those odd places in today's reading where things seem to happen so that "prophecy might be fulfilled." I don't think Matthew is saying these things just to prove that the prophets are accurate. No, he's saying that God is faithful. God's word can be depended on even in a time when everything else seems to be changing.

The prayer I just read from the service of morning prayer asks for faith that we “may go out with good courage, not knowing where we go.” Sometimes we think of faith like an intellectual game, sorting through the articles of the creeds to see what we can agree with and what we can’t. But this prayer isn’t talking about that kind of faith, but rather something entirely different, something entirely more precious. The prayer calls for a faith that represents a radical reliance on the goodness of God, the faithfulness of God’s plans for us, the fidelity of God’s care of us. This faith is not a set of beliefs we affirm but rather a way of seeing and interpreting the world and its events, seeing God at work where before we could only see Herod. And with this vision we see that we aren’t *uprooted*, but rather we are *transplanted* into new places and new futures that God is creating for us.

Here at the turn of the year, we need this kind of faith to envision a world that is different, that honors and follows a different kind of power and a different vision for how things can be and how we can make sense of them. The coming year will have changes for all of us – we don’t know what these changes will be except that we know that in them God will offer us opportunities for new life. I know this feeling is difficult to maintain – believe me, I know. But faith is only partly about feelings and even less about beliefs – mostly it is a way of living in hope, in fidelity to this God who is faithful to us, in the certainty that God enlivens and animates creation in spite of the Herods of this world.

The saddest thing about Herod is that he was so fearful of the star of Jesus that he couldn’t see his own star right over his head. For the wise men, this new star of Jesus meant that there was another way home, full of new ways to live. For the Holy Family, it meant that there was going to be a new home among strangers who would, in time, become a new people. For us, the star of Jesus always means another way to live and sometimes means

finding out what God wants for us in a new place. But we are never uprooted, we are always transplanted.

For those who follow the star of Christ, there is no ordinary life. That's good news. It won't be a life exempt from trouble – Jesus had that from the very beginning. Nor will it be a life exempt from painful changes – Jesus had those, right from the start. But the life of those who follow the star of Jesus will be a life full of beauty and meaning and grace, a life that offers peace and reconciliation and hope – who would want an ordinary life compared with that? Wherever your extraordinary life takes you in the coming year, God will go with.

Amen.