



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS, JANUARY 3, 2021
JEREMIAH 31:7-14; PSALM 84:1-8; MATTHEW 2:13-15,19-23

JOSEPH AND THE JOURNEY

Matthew 2:13-15,19-23 *[After the wise men 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 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."]*

Good morning to you on this 10th day of Christmas and third day of a new year! I don't think there has been any other time in my life where I have been so conscious of one year ending and a new one beginning. Not even at Y2K. This past week felt almost like a countdown of days and hours.

Perhaps because December 31 is also our wedding anniversary, I've long experienced New Year's Eve as a distinct marking point, a time for reflection on the year past and an intentional turn toward

the open door of a new year. It's symbolic of course; nothing really changes at the stroke of midnight. The history, gifts, and challenges of the prior year remain on January 1.

But this year, as we moved through December, I found myself longing for that marking point in a way I haven't before. I wanted to *understand* 2020, to *make sense* of all that we experienced in my family, in our faith community, in our country. And that is a way of saying I was ready to feel *back in control* of things. Yikes. If there's

anything I relearned last year, it is that we cannot control the future, we can only choose how to respond to the present.

And that brings us to today's gospel.

Found only in Matthew's gospel, it is a story of what happens when the news of an infant "king of the Jews" reaches the ears of the oppressive ruler Herod. We know that both at the time of Jesus' birth and when Matthew wrote his gospel over 70 years later, first-century Palestine was entirely dominated by Roman imperial power. This power was maintained through economic and military control and a theology of Caesar as the Son of God and exercised by client kings like Herod.

So, there was a long-standing dynamic of the kingdom of Caesar pitted against the prophetic vision of the kingdom of God; people without power or wealth, like Jesus' family, were caught in the crossfire. In addition, the community for whom this story is written is also reeling after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE and their separation from the synagogue for following the way of Jesus. They are grappling with big questions of identity and way of life.

So, when Herod learns of a rival king, he plots to kill Jesus, but as we heard today, angels of God repeatedly intervene to keep the Holy Family safe. They direct

Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt in the middle of the night; years later, the angels recall them to Israel when Herod has died and further direct them to live in Galilee, outside the rule of Herod's equally oppressive son.

In telling his story, Matthew repeatedly uses the formulation, "this was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophets." He does that to reassure his community that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Christ, the one they have waited for. In him lies their identity and the way of true life. These are the roots of the church.

So that's the context of the story, but what about Joseph? We know so little about him from scripture, but both Matthew and Luke suggest that he was kind, a person of integrity. And, the fact that Jesus envisions God as heavenly father reflects well on his experience of Joseph as human father, I think.¹ But we never hear Joseph speak, we only see him act.

¹ <https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-1-jesus-ancestry-birth-and-early-life>

The way Matthew tells this story, it can seem that Joseph impassively hears the angels' directions and then packs up his family without question. That somehow he understands the whole plan and his part is just to follow orders. But I'm not sure it's that simple. Everything that Joseph expected when he became betrothed to Mary has been turned upside down. And now he can't get a good night's sleep without being woken up by an angel with urgent news.

So let's imagine together what it was like to be Joseph. He sure seems to be someone who responds to the present rather than

trying to predict or control the future. What do you think he did when he woke up from

those dreams? How did he break the news to Mary that they were moving again?

What did they take with them and what did they leave behind?

That's the question that has been on my mind the last couple weeks – what to take up and what to leave behind. Not only about Joseph, but about this past year. If our identity is founded on following Jesus in loving God and loving neighbor, what do we take with us into this new year and what do we leave behind?

For one thing, we must take what we learned. Although not new, a number of fundamental truths sank in more deeply this past year.

- That we are completely interconnected with each other and with creation. We may be socially distanced, but the choices we make in our own lives about life-style and consumption have collateral impact on the earth and each other.
- That science, critical thinking, and an informed public are essential to our well-being.
- That if we are committed to respecting the dignity of every person, we have to step out of our own experience and center that of others.
- And that inequity is deeply entrenched in our society. By disproportionately harming Black, indigenous, and people of color, COVID laid bare – again – the impact of our country's long history of racism in employment, housing, access to healthcare and accumulation of wealth. The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and others laid bare – again – the regular violence inflicted on black and

brown bodies. That inequity and injustice are unacceptable in the kingdom of God.

- There are other such truths from this year that you might name.

What do we leave behind? Let's begin with the psychic and spiritual burdens of cynicism, fear, animosity and judgement of those who are different. There are other things you might name, too.

We enter this new year, as we do every calendar year, in Christmastide. In the fresh knowledge and joy that God became flesh and lives among us, showing us how to walk in love, and breathing into us that same holy spirit that transforms and heals.

This was captured for me last week when a physician friend² posted a photo of her receiving the COVID vaccine. She's masked, but you can tell she's smiling. She wrote, "a thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices." Indeed. "Yonder breaks a new and glorious morn."

What will you take with you into this new year? What will you leave behind?

² Katharine Lamperti, MD



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL