

#7 16-17

Psalm 148

Isaiah 63:7-9

Hebrews 2:10-18

Matthew 2:13-23

Trusting Change

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."

This text for the first Sunday after Christmas, which happens to fall on the first day of the secular calendar, is rich in symbolism for our faith, and for our New Beginnings. Joseph was given three dreams, through which he was able to protect his new small family, showing not only the power of God, but God's providence for the Messiah. Also, there is the comparison of this new Messiah to Moses. No one can overlook the similarities of the slaughter of the innocents, and the fleeing to Egypt and the escape from Egypt, as having definite comparisons to Moses. Matthew was trying to make it clear to his audience that in this birth, God's people have a new Hero - a new Moses! This is a very powerful theme to share with believers! The fear of an innocent which will bring the corrupt and power hungry to failure and ruin!

Susan Guthrie wrote:

The very story of Christmas is dark. Mary and Joseph together, fraught in a situation full of tension, are forced to participate in a census carried on by oppressive occupiers known for cruelty, corruption, and bullying. The town is so crowded, there's no comfortable place for the pregnant girl about to deliver her child, so the couple settle for an animal's hut or cave, neither clean nor pretty. Meanwhile, the local king, a paranoid maniac, orders the massacre of all the male children under the age of two in a savage act of terror. The mother and father escape, carrying with their child the guilt of survival. While the slaughter of the innocents may not be historically accurate, this story makes the nativity truer than the happily-ever-after fairy-tale quality that a purely happy Christmas offers. Jesus enters a real world, like ours, where children are poor, malnourished, enslaved, and poisoned by greed's numbing exploitations. Taking the Nativity story out of the grim contexts in order to make it pretty, defeats the purpose of the Incarnation.

This story is terrifying! Absolutely terrifying! For a moment imagine being Joseph. Here he is, on the road, following the orders of the government, his wife highly pregnant, they go through the chaos of labor in a strange place, not even a room. Thank God ~ literally~ that the child was born and the mother lived! What a relief, and a joy. He already knows that this is a special child, he was told by an Angel from the Lord in Chapter 1, verses 20-22. Then the news seems to have reached others as well. The shepherds, the Magi, all come to worship ~ confirming to Joseph and Mary what they already knew: that God's truth will not be kept

secret from those who are worthy. In fact, they find out soon, that God's truth is discovered by one unworthy - Herod. But Joseph had no way of knowing that.

So, in keeping with the mystical way that God loving souls understand God's will, Joseph was told in a dream to that Herod has evil plans. So this little family of refugees flee to the place their people had once been slaves, this strange land was the safest place for them now. One can only imagine how this Jewish family felt raising their child and forming their household away from their families and friends, in fear for their lives.

Again, the sacred communication line - Joseph is told in a dream that he can return to Israel - following the path of Moses - from Egypt to the Holy Land! But then they heard that Archelaus was ruling there, a man who, according to R. Alan Culpepper, "is so brutal that he is later removed from power by the Romans - who were not usually intolerant of brutality." So in another dream they were sent, for protection to Nazareth. Now, according to Frank A. Thomas, "Nazareth was a despised place . . . The Messiah was looked after, provided for, and placed in an environment where he could be nurtured and grow, even in the midst of dangerous and violent circumstances."

What a beginning this child had. What a life this little refugee family had. No wonder his identity as God With Us was later noted by having no place to lay their heads, as the foxes do. For Jesus' earliest beginning were founded on trusting on the word of God through mystical voices in dreams. A faith that proved to protect this special child and his family through horrific trials. Preparing Jesus to bear even more as he becomes an adult, and lives and teaching about the providence and power and presence of the living God.

And the point of this annual lesson, is to remind us, at the beginning of a New Year, that whatever comes our way in this next year - we can trust God to be with us, and we will be told what to do next, if we are willing to sacrifice our comfort for the Will of God.

I imagine Mary and Joseph would have loved to have stayed a little longer in the manger, where they had so much joy and attention. I imagine they would have loved to have returned to Israel, the Holy Land, the promised land . . . but just as Moses didn't make it neither did they at first. I imagine there were many times where there was a temptation not to respond to the Call of God and, instead, to stay in Galilee and be a good and worthy Carpenter. But it is the trust of God's people in their ability to hear and do the Will of God which gives this world Hope.

Without the faith in God, without our listening and responding to that Faith, how will we be able to help other refugee families in need? How will we be able to care for new families? How will we know when a tyrant is threatening the justice in a country? How can we empower people to know and love and trust the God and the wisdom and the power and the providence of the sacred over and against the profane?

Our lives, this world, is divided into 2 parts - the sacred and the profane, and Christ came to show us that God is on the side of those who love compassion and do justice. This scripture is showing us the example of what happened to help Jesus let go and trust change. He was accustomed to caring more about the voice of the sacred than the comfort of the familial. He was brought up loving the stranger and wanted to be loved, in spite of being a stranger. He was taught well to listen to the teachings of his faith and to discern, discuss and participate in the life of Faith! As we go forth into 2017, let us make it our promise, as we promised at our Baptism, to trust God and to seek God's providence - believe in it and trust in it, every day, and to encourage each other to be courageous in His name. Amen