

The Flight Into Egypt

Our Gospel reading today brings us face to face with the *dangerous* side of Christmas.

Now that may seem at first like a very strange thing to say. The “dangerous” side of Christmas? Christmas is the festival of birth. Christmas is the celebration of the coming of the Light into the world. Christmas is the proclamation of peace on earth and goodwill to all people. Even the secular song says that Christmas is “the most wonderful time of the year.” How could there possibly be a “dangerous” side to Christmas?

The dangerous element in the Christmas story comes in when we remember who this child is, who this infant will grow up to be, how this birth is the beginning of a life that will lead to controversy and conflict and crucifixion. The way Matthew tells his story of Jesus, he never lets us forget for long that Jesus is born to save us from our sins by becoming the atoning sacrifice for our sins, that Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us, because he opens for us a new way to God through the offering of his Body and his Blood. Matthew never lets us forget for long that Jesus’ mission to bring God’s reign of justice and peace to the earth has its enemies, and that even from the beginning Jesus’ mission was under threat. Matthew’s Gospel is the one that records that the wise men brought myrrh, which was traditionally used to anoint bodies for burial—a strange gift for a baby, but a powerful symbol of sacrifice. And it is Matthew’s Gospel that records Herod’s determination to wipe out his competition and make sure that no upstart Chosen One of God could upset him from his throne.

“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.’” According to Matthew’s telling, the second thing that happened in young Jesus’ life—after an unexpected visit from some foreign astrologers—the second thing that happened to Jesus in his life was that he and his parents became refugees, displaced persons, forced to seek political asylum in a country whose relations with their homeland had always been dicey at best and downright hostile at worst. It was a dangerous, uncertain, unwelcome journey Joseph and Mary and baby Jesus had to undertake, and a dangerous, uncertain, unwelcoming destination to which they went.

Matthew doesn’t give us any details about the life the Holy Family lived in Egypt. We don’t know how long they stayed there. We don’t know a thing about how Joseph supported his family, or whether Mary was accepted and included by the other women of the village where they were hiding out, or what kind of education or formative experiences Jesus might have had in that alien land. I read a rather fanciful account once that suggested that Jesus in Egypt was exposed to the cult of Isis and Osiris and was schooled in the Egyptian mysteries, and that’s where his own miraculous powers as an adult came from. (To tell you the truth, I don’t really put much stock in that one...) More soberly, historians say that there were groups of Jews living in Egypt in the first century—so they say it’s entirely possible that Joseph and Mary and Jesus were not living among total strangers, but did continue to have contact with their people and their traditions and their synagogue life and their faith. Famously, the author Anne Rice a few years ago stopped writing about vampires and witches and turned her attention to a novel account of the boyhood of Jesus in Egypt—something that made rather a stir in the publishing world. Over the years there have been many such more-or-less imaginative attempts to fill in this gap Matthew leaves in his story—but the fact is we really just don’t know what it was like for Jesus and Mary and Joseph when they made their flight into Egypt.

But even if we can’t know the details, it doesn’t take a lot of historical background or wild imagination to know that the journey to Egypt and the sojourn there were could not have been easy. Travel in the ancient world was always difficult and dangerous—and travel with a baby would be doubly so. Roads weren’t good. People of Joseph and Mary’s class usually travelled by foot—we often see depictions of them traveling with a donkey, but historically it’s more likely that they only had their feet to carry them. And walking on rough, uneven roads, carrying a baby, couldn’t have been easy. And travelers could never be certain what kind of welcome they’d receive in a town, whether there’d be a place to stay, whether they’d be able to find a place to buy some food—needless to say, there weren’t Motel 6’s and McDonald’s on every street corner in those days. And when they reached their destination, when Joseph finally got his wife and son across the border and out of Herod’s

territory, there was no telling what sort of a place they might find to settle down in or what quality of life they might be able to maintain. And worst of all, as I imagine it, worst of all would be the uncertainty, the not-knowing: would Jesus be safe? would Herod or Herod's agents somehow find them and find a way to get at them? would they ever be able to go home again? and where was God in all of this for them—what *good* would God be able to bring out of this mess their lives had become?

And I think that's the point Matthew is trying to make in this story. The point is not what their life may or may not have been like in Egypt; the point is that even in Egypt, even in a time of exile and uncertainty and anxiety, even then God was with them, even then God was guiding and shaping and strengthening them to play their parts in Christ's mission. Joseph may have asked himself where God was in all of this—yet at every important turning point God directed Joseph, God sent an angel in a dream to speak to Joseph, and encourage Joseph what to do next, and to bring them at last to a new home in Nazareth where they could grow and flourish in peace. And even more importantly from Matthew's point of view, these uncertain and anxious events in Jesus' life did not happen in a vacuum, they weren't just random occurrences, but they happened in connection with God's words in the Hebrew Scriptures—in fulfillment of prophecies, Matthew would say—they happened as events in a pattern of God's redeeming work in the world that began long before Jesus' birth and that would continue in Jesus' name long after Jesus' earthly life. The point of the flight into Egypt story for Matthew is that even in difficult circumstances, even in times of alienation and uncertainty, even when everything seems under threat, even in the *dangerous* side of the Christmas story—even then God is at work to shape them and form them and guide them in the mission of Christ, even then God is with them in Jesus to make them strong for the reign of justice and peace.

And that, I think, is the part of the story that's the take-home message for us. The meaning of the flight into Egypt story for us is that God in Jesus is with us in our times of uncertainty and anxiety, God in Jesus is with us when we feel alienated from the things that give us assurance of being safe and secure, God in Jesus is with us when it seems like the things that matter to us are under threat, God in Jesus is with us in the dangerous sides of our lives—God in Jesus is with us to guide us and form us and strengthen us for our parts in the mission of justice and peace. The Gospel today calls us to recognize that life often forces us to go on journeys we had not wanted, and to sojourn in emotional places or life-situations that are far from anything we would want to call home. But the Gospel also tells us that God is with us in those alien places, God is weaving the events of our lives into the larger pattern of God's redeeming work in the world, God is guiding us to a home where we can flourish in grace and peace. The good news for us today is that God will not abandon us in an anxious world, but that out of our own Egypts God will call us as God's adopted daughters and sons.

That's true for the soldier in Iraq, wondering if he'll be kept safe long enough to make it home. That's true for the young person struggling with the betrayal of a friend, and wondering what next step to take in this strange journey of growing up. That's true for the worker who's anxious about her job in the recession, or the retiree who's watching the value of his 401(k) keep going down. That's true for the street person who finds it harder and harder to get help when, just like him, the charities themselves are running out of cash. That's true for the alcoholic or the addict who's working at being sober but has no illusions about it being easy. That's true for the person waiting for the diagnosis. That's true for the mother or the father who wants to do everything possible to keep their child safe and secure in an uncertain and dangerous world, and yet who also knows that sometimes the most important thing they can do is step back and let their child find her or his own way in a tough time. That is true for all of us, at one time or another, when we are feeling alone and threatened and alienated, when we are feeling surrounded by a world that doesn't know us and that doesn't care: it is true for us too that God will not abandon us, but in our Egypts God will give us strength, out of our Egypts God will bring us home.

And that's why I think it is important that we spend some time today with this “dangerous” side of the Christmas story. Because in the end Christmas has to be about more than shepherds and angels, more than frankincense and gold, more than just the “nice” feelings of a holiday season. In the end Christmas must be about Jesus sharing life with us, Jesus sharing *all* of life with us, Jesus with us in the worst places, so that Jesus can bring us to the best God has for us. It is in the spirit of that Gospel message that we pray today: O God, grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.