

II Christmas 2022
Sermon – Saint Joseph Parish
Father Herbert Plimpton
Matt. 2:19-23



When Herod was dead, Behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child's life...And he arose, and took the young child and his mother, and came into the land of Israel...But when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judea on the room of his father, Herod, he was afraid to go thither; notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside in to the parts of Galilee:...and he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth.

There is so much of life with God hidden between these lines. God gives directions to Joseph to move so as to save the holy family from harm or destruction, Joseph obeys. He honors the words from God obediently, and God leads His little Holy Family where He wishes. As a result, they avoid disaster and end up safe, but not where they expected.

The events surrounding the early life of Jesus follow upon one another in an almost effortless sequence of commanding and obeying, with a minimum of fuss and muss. The steps to safety are reported to be seamlessly accomplished. On the surface of things, the Holy Family returns from exile in four easy verses...God is on His throne, and all is right with the world.
I don't think so.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph have now been in exile in Egypt for a couple of years. Recall that the birth story as Matthew tells it begins with Joseph being told by an angel that his fiancée was pregnant.. Not what he was planning and certainly not what he was expecting..Once Jesus is born and the forces of evil are set in motion with Herod's murderous plan, the angel returns to Joseph and tells him to rise up from sleep in haste and make for Egypt.

No time for Mary to set the house in order, for Joseph to gather up the tools of his trade that put food on the table, to forage for supplies for the journey, arrange to stay in touch with or bid farewell to friends and family, or to tie up loose ends in Bethlehem. They must move quickly and

obediently, but a move to Egypt is not what they were expecting.

The Holy Family walks for 350 miles...spending three weeks mostly on foot in the wilderness reversing the steps of the Exodus. Jesus is a babe in arms, and the family is vulnerable to hunger, thirst, banditry, and injury. We can imagine Jesus infant skin was reddened from exposure to the sun and desert winds. So many of the wells Mary counted on to keep her milk flowing during the journey to Egypt turn out to have run dry. But God's plan has been fulfilled as the Nile comes into their view.

Let's move forward in time. Egypt has been their home now for at least a couple of years, but home proves temporary. Even though Egypt was known at this time to be the "GoTo" place of refuge for those fleeing the tyranny of Palestinian kings, Mary and Joseph have been want to establish deep ties in a land where the laws of living are unsettling, language is a tangle of tongues, and the sources for the necessities of daily life undependable.

While Jesus toddles in a sunlit doorway, Joseph and Mary look out to the town square with trepidation, for they know that Herod's agents are still lurking there. To Joseph, It seems God has not revealed Himself in some time since they arrived. All he has for security is the knowledge that he has obeyed God's direction. In exile, he is sweating the details of a precarious life, while God's plan unfolds invisibly above him.

There have always been periods of exile for those who are going home to God. Abraham knew exile, as did Moses, as do Joseph and Mary. As the people dwelling in Jerusalem knew when its protective walls came down and the enemy soldiers herded them, their aged parents and babes in arms into captivity in Babylon. That exile lasted forty years. God's chosen people had to let go of familiar ways of living and worshipping. They longed for home and the ways things used to be. As the Psalmist describes their plight, they wept by the waters of Babylon.

But back to the little family in Egypt, where the Son of God is coming into boyhood. Herod has died and God again sends Joseph an angel in his dreams. The angel's words echo those he's heard before, "Arise, take the young child and his mother and go back to the land of Israel." Once again, Joseph obeys.

By now, Jesus is learning to read faces. Seeing the anxiety in his mother's, he asks his father if he can bring his few dusty makeshift toys with them to this new place called Israel. Little Jesus learns how much it hurts to say good-bye to the kids and the cats who have befriended him. He wonders how anyone can sleep in the desert with the stars watching.

The plan is to return from exile to Bethlehem..to go back to their familiar surroundings, to sleep in their real beds. They set out for home, but now news reaches the attentive Joseph that one of Herod's three sons, Archelaus, is ruling over their homeland. His reputation for brutality outstrips that of his father Herod.

Once again, the direction of life for the holy family changes. God warns Joseph to alter course now for Galilee, where Archelaus has no power. Joseph has to share news with Mary that they are not returning to their familiar dwelling after all. And Galilee is two or three days further on foot from Bethlehem. But why Galilee?

When I was preparing this homily, I learned that the root Hebrew word for Galilee is "pivot". How apt! If one thinks about the birth narrative of Jesus that Matthew tells, in God's hands, all the little family has done since the Savior's birth has been about pivoting, trying to keep up as best they can with the way God's plans for them seem to change, accepting the earthly reality that home is never home for long.

Those young parents who fled Jerusalem with their babes in arms are now hobbling seniors returning from Babylon. Younger Moms and Dads have filled the imaginations of the children they've raised in captivity with remembrances of what life is like back home. Now the trajectory of all their lives is changing in keeping with God's plans for his chosen people. They too, must pivot and turn their faces to the hills of Jerusalem. They have the good tidings of Isaiah ringing in their ears as they turn their backs on Babylon. Beauty will take the place of ashes, the oils of joy will heal their mourning.

Their expectations are high as they near the outskirts of the holy city. But now they encounter strangers tilling their grandparents' fields. Families of foreigners are lodging under the roofs that once sheltered them. The dependable places where they once sought food and firewood have

vanished. The familiar is no longer. A little time goes by and the people of Jerusalem complete rebuilding their Second Temple...Alas, it is a day of small things. The temple lacks its former grandeur. Disappointment with the way things now are meets with the expectations they had of a comfortable resettlement. Their religion now seems not to have delivered its promise of peace and Judaism itself has fractured into sects.

Beloved, we too look for our return from exile in the land of Covid. The last two years have been all about pivoting. We have had to follow strange and ceaselessly changing directions instead of familiar ways to keep safe and sound, we have had to turn away from gatherings and ways of doing we had always held dear, we have had to learn the foreign tongue of epidemiology. We worry if our sons and daughters will find jobs that are gone, jobs that once brought them such a sense of accomplishment. The return to normal seems a time of small things and disappointment that things are not as they were..The normal of the new normal leaves us ill at ease.

How many of us of a certain age long for the comfort, the calm, the changelessness of a Sunday afternoon that lasts the rest of our lives? For us as for His holy little family, alas..it is not to be so. We worship a God who acts in History, whose salvation plan in so many ways seems hidden while He muddles with ours, whose throne room rarely holds Him. God is afoot, but His name is Immanuel, and HE IS with us. He will have us be nimble, responsive to the new world He is creating, able to pivot and move with Him. Our home is with Him, not here.

It's time to shelve the pipe dream of a retired life lived in evening slippers. Let's keep our walking shoes by the bedside...and let's keep a weather eye to the East for the God in Whom we live, and MOVE and have our being.

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