

The focus of the Church, the Body of Christ, often runs counter to the focus of popular culture. I mentioned at the beginning of Advent how the lectionary scriptures for the season leading up to the celebration of the birth of Christ seem out of joint from the economically enforced pattern of jollity leading up to the cultural celebration of Christmas. During Advent, the recommended scriptures guide us to think more about eschatology than frivolity, more about the end of time than the end of the year. The lectionary for the week following Christmas and, indeed, the post-Christmas story itself as related in the Gospels, is equally jarring if we are expecting to adhere to cultural norms and spend the week between Christmas and New Year's in a blissful haze of warm fuzzies. No, the Gospels, particularly Matthew, follow the good news of the sweet babe in the manger with news of a rather different kind, hard-edged, hard to hear.

You may recall that I focused on this passage from Matthew in the week after Christmas last year, as well, and specifically on the part of the story referred to as the Slaughter of the Innocents. If you don't remember and are curious, that sermon is on our website. But this year, I want to look at what folksy ABC Radio newscaster Paul Harvey might call, "the rest... of the story." In some ways, it has more immediate relevance to us in 21st Century Seattle, the events of last week in Carnation notwithstanding. Before we look at that relevance, however, I'd like to spend a few minutes making sure we consider how Matthew's first audience would have heard this story.

It is widely held by scholars that the Gospel according to Matthew was written primarily for Jewish Christians in the First Century. There would have been no need to explain or justify to them the reputation of Herod the Great for unspeakable cruelty. The historian Josephus documents dreadful massacres ordered by Herod, who did not hesitate to have his own sons or wives executed if he felt they threatened him. In his book, The Birth of the Messiah, Raymond Brown relates an infamous story of Herod: "To ensure mourning at his funeral, Herod wanted his soldiers instructed to kill notable political prisoners upon the news of his death. His goal was expressed thus: 'So shall all Judea and every household weep for me, whether they wish it or not.'" That Joseph thought it prudent to flee from the country with his wife and newborn baby upon a supernatural warning of the king's wrath would have been quite understandable to a group of Jewish Christians only a generation removed from immediate memory of Herod's brutality.

Likewise the endpoints of the two journeys undertaken by the little family would have seemed eminently sensible to Matthew's audience. There was a substantial Jewish community in Egypt in the First Century and Joseph could have slipped his family into that community without attracting undue notice and found a friendly group of émigrés and refugees who would have helped him to find shelter and work. Upon the family's return to the land of their birth, the Galilee of Herod Antipas was indeed a more pacific region than Judea under Archelaus. Furthermore, the hamlet of Nazareth, probably home to about a hundred people at this period, was close by the far more substantial city of Sepphoris, where Herod Antipas had his capitol and where work for a carpenter would have been plentiful.

Those are some of the practical points that would have rung true to Matthew's audience. But in telling the story of Jesus' nativity, Matthew also wanted to point out parallels between the story of the Messiah and other great works done by God on Israel's behalf. As they read or heard

Matthew's work, those First Century Jewish Christians would have immediately identified Jesus' foster father with another Joseph who was a well-known dreamer. They would have thought of Jacob's son, Joseph, whose dreams also took him to Egypt, a sudden journey that saved his life as well, although not by his own choosing. They would have remembered, too, that thanks to Joseph the Dreamer, all his siblings and their families, the Children of Israel, were brought to Egypt to save them from famine. As they heard the story of Herod's orders to kill the babies in Bethlehem, they would have remembered what befell their ancestors in Egypt, that Pharaoh, afraid that the Children of Israel had become too numerous and would overthrow their Egyptian hosts, had also ordered the slaughter of Israelite children. And they would have remembered that, thanks to one boy-child saved from the slaughter by the desperate act of a loving parent, their forebears had been led from slavery into freedom, "out of Egypt" and into the Promised Land.

Matthew writes on several occasions in this passage and in the remainder of the Gospel that events in Jesus' life "fulfilled what was spoken by the prophets." A common understanding of that phrase leads us to take the position that the Old Testament prophets cited by Matthew were speaking only about the coming Christ and nothing more. A study of the prophetic verses involved, however, quickly shows that it is very likely that they meant something rather different in their original context. Hosea, whom Matthew quotes in the "Out of Egypt" phrase, was clearly referring to the original Exodus in describing God's love for God's people. In the image of Rachel weeping for her children, Jeremiah, the original author of the quote, was describing the desolation of the Babylonian exile. And in what may appear to us to be stretching things a bit, Matthew's assertion, "He will be called a Nazorean," is likely a reference to Isaiah's prophecy that "a branch (*nezer* in Hebrew) shall grow out of (Jesse's) roots." While that prophecy had long been associated with the hope for a Messiah by Matthew's time, it is also possible that it initially was considered to be realized in good King Hezekiah of Judah.

If we disregard the faith-history of these verses and reduce the words of Hosea, Jeremiah and Isaiah to simple predictions of Jesus, we do a disservice to the history and living faith of our Jewish brothers and sisters and fail to appreciate the amazing pattern of care and redemption that God has shown for people throughout history. Paul Nancarrow, canon theologian for the Episcopal Diocese of Minnesota, suggests that this narrow, one-to-one correspondence, was likely not Matthew's intent. In commenting on this passage and referring to Matthew's ongoing portrayal of Jesus as the "new Moses," Nancarrow writes, "there is no sense in which Matthew is saying that the typology of Moses' life is "fulfilled" and "superseded" in the antitype of Jesus' life. Instead, a less direct, more suggestive kind of correspondence is at work here, a broader assertion that, as God was at work in Moses, so also (and more so) is God at work in Jesus." Nancarrow goes on to write, "In their original contexts these verses suggest how God acts to save the faithful people from suffering; Matthew sees this divine saving action as recapitulated and deepened—made fuller, "fulfilled"—in Jesus... Matthew uses prophecy not as *prediction*, but as the *elucidation* of patterns in God's saving action, patterns which are enacted and re-enacted with both continuity and novelty in new actualities." God's love for God's Creation, in other words, remains constant, as does God's ongoing work within Creation to redeem and to extend the Beloved Community, the Kingdom of God. But the specifics of God's actions change just as the situation for God's people changes. That is why, in reading both Matthew's story and the words of the writer of Hebrews today, we may see these words as words written for us, about

us and to us. The writings of Hosea, Jeremiah and Isaiah, of Torah and the Writings, of the Evangelists and the Epistle writers and the Revelator, all of these words are fulfilled for us as we discover the truth of them in our own lives and as they lead us to closer relationship with their God and our God.

And so, we are able to take this story of a little family long ago and far away and learn from it about our world and times. How do we understand the story of the flight into Egypt today? To begin with, we might call Jesus, Mary and Joseph refugees, fleeing from the specific threat of impending violence from a capricious dictator. That is certainly not an unknown aspect of life in the 21st Century. Each year, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) releases a report on the number and general status of “persons of concern,” that is, “refugees, returnees and stateless and internally displaced persons.” In their 2006 report, UNHCR noted, “the report thus does not purport to depict a comprehensive picture of global forced displacement. For example, some 4.3 million Palestinian refugees who fall under the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East are not included in the report. Likewise, the conflict-generated internally displaced persons covered in the report are limited to those benefiting directly or indirectly from UNHCR’s protection and assistance activities.” The numbers, in other words, are understated. Nevertheless, according to the report, the total number of “people of concern” stood at 21 million at the end of 2005. By the close of 2006 it was 32.9 million, the most dramatic one year increase in memory. Hundreds of thousands of people became newly displaced in Colombia, Iraq, Lebanon, Sri Lanka and Timor. Increased data-gathering in other nations such as the Cote d’Ivoire, Congo and Uganda increased the numbers dramatically. Even North America experienced dramatic rises in internally displaced persons as a result of Hurricane Katrina.

But that is not the only impact of these tragic statistics on our own country. For many of these frightened, endangered people, the United States would be their destination of choice. In their song, “The Refugee,” on the 1983 album, “War,” U2 portray the experience of so many Third World “displaced persons”: “She’s the refugee/Her mama say one day she’s gonna/live in America.” Of course, due to quotas and the expense of travel, most of them never get here. It does raise the question, what if Joseph’s family had been turned back at the Egyptian border for lack of a visa? What if they’d not found helpful people along the way? The great French composer Hector Berlioz tells the story of their journey in his Christmas oratorio, “L’*enfance du Christ*.” At one point in their journey, the family is taken in by a family of Ishmaelites or as we would call them, Arabs, the enemies of Jews from time immemorial. The Ishmaelite father sings, “Come in, come in. You will find hospitality here. You’re a carpenter? I’m a carpenter too! What a coincidence. What a pretty baby Jesus is! Come in, eat, drink and rest. Sleep well. Don’t have any bad dreams.” Afterwards, the chorus sings: “And thus it was that our Savior was rescued by an infidel.” Only through acts of kindness do “infidels” become brothers. What sort of changes would be wrought in our world, I wonder, if more people stood ready to extend hospitality and help to those who did not look like them, did not speak their language, did not even believe as they did?

As we consider the story of the flight into Egypt and its relevance for our time, we should also hear the echoes that Matthew intended from the story of the first Joseph and his family; the story in Genesis of how the Children of Israel moved to Egypt. In that story, the impetus for

Out of Egypt

relocation was not the threat of violent death, but the threat of death from starvation. Perhaps we would call that group not refugees, but immigrants. For all of the Euro-dominated history of North America, our land has been seen as a land of plenty, a land of opportunity. Another of my favorite rock and rollers, Bruce Springsteen, has often used his songs to comment on the situation of those who come to our shores seeking a better future for themselves and their children. On his recent album, "We Shall Overcome," "The Boss" sings a song called "American Land." The opening verses are written from the perspective of one of Springsteen's own ancestors, an Irish immigrant in the early days of the last century:

What is this land of America, so many travel there
I'm going now while I'm still young, my darling meet me there
Wish me luck my lovely, I'll send for you when I can
And we'll make our home in the American land

There's diamonds in the sidewalks, there's gutters lined in song
Dear I hear that beer flows through the faucets all night long
There's treasure for the taking, for any hard working man
Who will make his home in the American land

Later in the song, Springsteen looks back on the immigrant experience from his own modern viewpoint:

The McNicholas, the Posalski's, the Smiths, Zerillis too
The Blacks, the Irish, the Italians, the Germans and the Jews
The Puerto Ricans, illegals, the Asians, Arabs miles from home
Come across the water with a fire down below

They died building the railroads, worked to bones and skin
They died in the fields and factories, names scattered in the wind
They died to get here a hundred years ago, they're dyin' now
The hands that built the country we're all trying to keep down

There's diamonds in the sidewalk, there's gutters lined in song
Dear I hear that beer flows through the faucets all night long
There's treasure for the taking, for any hard working man
Who will make his home in the American land

On an earlier album, entitled "The Ghost of Tom Joad," Springsteen carefully weaves multiple stories in song, showing a number of different current characters who might be said to reflect the life of Tom Joad. Joad, you may recall, was the fictional protagonist of The Grapes of Wrath, a member of a family of "Okies" who fled the desolation of the "Dust Bowl" of the American Midwest to find a better life in California, which for them had become the sort of mythical destination that all of America has been for other migrants. In the song, "Across the Border," a young Mexican man speaks to his wife of the prospect of slipping into the modern land of milk and honey. In language strongly reminiscent of Israel's yearning for the Promised Land, he sings:

For what are we
Without hope in our hearts

Out of Egypt

That someday we'll drink from God's blessed waters
And eat the fruit from the vine
I know love and fortune will be mine
Somewhere across the border.

It is impossible in this time in our history to hear the story in the last half of Matthew 2 and not think of all the desperate families fleeing from war, from poverty, from disease. When we think of Jesus, the one whom our faith teaches was the Word of God made flesh, we must consider that his flesh, like ours, was subject to hunger, to disease, to injury, and even to death. When we think of the Holy Child during this blessed season, we are called to remember his words as a man, that all will be judged on the basis of how they treated the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, the stranger. "As you have done to the least of these, my brothers and sisters," said Jesus, "you have done to me."

For the writer of Hebrews, the significance of the Christ-event, the story of Jesus, is that he did indeed share our human condition with us. "Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested." We need not be on the run from a cruel dictator to identify with Jesus. As the Rev. Richard Enslinger writes, "For if Jesus and Joseph and Mary could make these journeys and dwell in a land as alien sojourners, then our journeys and our lives as aliens and sojourners can be navigated as well." Most of us spend a good part of our lives running from death, afraid of the death that will end our lives, afraid of the little marks of death that interrupt our lives. But through his death, at the hands of yet more powerful men who were afraid of him, Jesus has destroyed the power of death and set free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. Thanks to Jesus, we are led "out of Egypt," out of our own personal Egypts, our places of spiritual exile and slavery. Jesus is our pattern, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Through Jesus, we find the compassion we need to care for others, the strength we need to carry on ourselves. The message and the miracle of Matthew's story is not simply that a child was born, not simply that he was spared a premature death and lived to become a man, the promised branch of Jesse, but that God comes to us again and again, lives with us, suffers with us and that through Jesus the Emmanuel, we are set free from death so that we may walk with God in bringing God's peace to the Earth. For the Child and his story, for our stories, and for the great consummation which is here and yet coming, thanks be to God!