

Today's Sermon

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

January 3, 2016

The Second Sunday after Christmas

Matthew 2

Overwhelmed by Joy

Overcoming darkness and restoring the world

—The Rev. Drew Downs

In the Beginning

The Hebrew story begins in creation, in GOD bringing forth everything into the world. Then granting the first humans work: To name everything. To till the soil. To give birth to children.

Over time, the people caused problems for one another and all of creation. They warred. And separated. And killed one another.

From this separated people, a family was called to follow GOD into the wilderness.

And it was their great grandson who led that family into Egypt, saving them from severe famine. And it was GOD, through that grandson, who saved all of civilization.

After many generations, the people forgot this family and what GOD was doing through them. A terrible king, a Pharaoh of Egypt enslaved that family's people. He slaughtered all of their infant boys. But one escaped, floating down the Nile in an ark. He was saved and raised in Pharaoh's own house.

This boy would grow up to be Moses: the one who would lead the people out of Egypt and to the Promised Land.

This later story, with its plagues and frightening depictions of divine power, has become the seminal Hebrew story. The Passover. A story of salvation and liberation. The very definition of GOD's promise to protect and save the Hebrew people.

The Tyranny of Egypt

For later generations, Egypt becomes the symbol of

tyranny. It is from Egypt that King Solomon buys chariots and horses, to pile up weapons and become an ancient times arms dealer. During Israel's decline, then Judah's, the prophets warn the people not to go to Egypt for help.

Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help
and who rely on horses,
who trust in chariots because they are many
and in horsemen because they are very strong,
but do not look to the Holy One of Israel
or consult the LORD!
(Isaiah 31:1)

Don't go buying weapons from Egypt, Isaiah warns, trusting in weapons over GOD!

For Egypt symbolizes for them persecution, tyranny, and violence. They are not to go back there. Every Hebrew would know this. Many sought the protection anyway and were condemned for it.

This is what we walk into when we read Matthew 2.

Herod and Despair

Jesus has just been born. Some astrologers from the East hear about it and they come looking for this infant king. They follow a star, which brings them to the right country. So they go to the capital city looking for the infant king and they ask around. Of course Herod finds out. Remember, he's a usurper king. He's also a mad tyrant. Scott Hoezee writes this about him:

This particular monarch named Herod was among the ancient world's most despised despots. He was, in the last analysis, insane and dangerous. In the years prior to the birth of Jesus and the appearance of these Magi, Herod had murdered no less than three of his own sons. Why? Because he feared they had designs on usurping his throne. Herod's proclivity to violence was so well known that even Caesar Augustus once privately told

someone that it was safer to be one of Herod's pigs than one of his sons! Historians believe Herod came to power around the year 37 B.C. When some of the Jewish leaders of that day initially protested Herod's presence in the area of Judea, Herod responded by rounding up a large number of Pharisees and then having them flogged and killed.

His jealousy knows no bounds. So he plots the killing of all the infant boys "in and around Bethlehem". To save Jesus, Joseph is told to leave their new home in Bethlehem and flee to Egypt with Mary and their infant son. They go to Egypt for protection, but not protection through weapons: protection through GOD. In the land to which their people are to never return. Egypt once again provides salvation to the people, as it did with an earlier Joseph.

Eventually the holy family can go back, but not to their true home in Bethlehem. They must hide in their adopted home of Nazareth.

Boundless Joy

The writer of Matthew gives us for his Christmas story this dark tale of tyranny and evil. Of a madman so willing to take power and then protect that power, he would murder his own sons, and then, the sons of everyone in Bethlehem.

The Evangelist tells a story which resonates so fully with the Hebrew story of oppression and enslavement under Pharaoh. Herod is the new Pharaoh! Judah has become Egypt!

But it turns these connections on their heads and forces us to see that it wasn't Egypt the country that GOD hated, but the state-sanctioned violence, the weapons, and the war-making. GOD similarly condemned Solomon for trusting his worldly wisdom above his faith in GOD when he became an arms dealer. This kind of power and trust in earthly violence for protection is the furthest we can get from GOD.

And yet GOD breaks in. Right there. In that space. In the darkest corners and the most depraved of circumstances. GOD comes there. Not in the malaise of indifference or the satisfaction of the status quo. GOD breaks in here: at our most desperate. The light shines in darkness.

This story is really, then about hope. In what should be a story of darkness, we see a light transforming and redeeming even Egypt. A light which cannot be consumed by the darkness.

We see a light which brings people from a far-off place to that new home in Bethlehem, bringing gifts to an infant king. The real king, given to the people by GOD, anointed. So unlike the usurper, who kills to get and keep the crown.

And this trio come and see him, this young boy, this king-to-be, and they are overwhelmed with joy. My friend David writes:

In the Greek, it says the Magi weren't just overjoyed, but that upon seeing the star and finding Jesus, they rejoiced with exceedingly great and boundless joy.

Overwhelming, boundless joy. This is the Christmas story. This is the light shining in the darkness. A child whose very presence causes strangers from afar to "[rejoice] with exceedingly great and boundless joy".

It is joy in the midst of despair. A joy we need in all of our dark times: the ones we're in now and the ones to come.

Let Jesus come in. Let him enter into this space. Let's take him with us; show him around town. Let him experience the true joy the Spirit fills our hearts with.

Let Jesus see the real us. The vulnerable and insecure us; the us we hide away from the world. The place from which our best (and worst) ideas come. From there, we look upon him. And let him fill us with exceedingly great and boundless joy.

That we might rejoice without regard to the time and place or even appropriate decorum. For this is the cornerstone of his kingdom. May our joy be the bricks which build it here and our love be the mortar which binds us in hope now and forever. Amen

