

“He’s Coming Back”

ST. MATTHEW 2:13-23

210103_2C_FlightintoEgypt

Grace to you and Peace from God our creator and our Lord Jesus Christ. It’s a joy to be with you as we give thanks on this first Sunday of 2021. Listen with me this morning for a call. God is calling, and in particular, calling us out of a most unique year in our lifetimes, 2020. As we consider the stories surrounding Jesus’ birth and earliest years, the last of them concerns danger and tragedy. Matthew tells us of Joseph being warned in a dream to (13) “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.” As he tries to make some sense of all of this, Matthew comes to this conclusion: This sojourn in Egypt makes possible the fulfilment of a prophecy of Hosea where God says, “Out of Egypt Have I called My son.”

Escaping to Egypt was set in motion because some foreigners, magi, people who gazed at the heavens for clues, arrive in Jerusalem and ask Herod about a new king born to the Jews. Herod, you may remember, kills anyone and everyone he considers a threat, so he makes a decision to hunt down the child and his parents.

By now Joseph has learned to trust the angel of his dreams, so abruptly he ups and takes Mary and toddler Jesus from Bethlehem to Egypt, probably Alexandria, or what the Egyptians now call Cairo. People say there were maybe 750,000 to 1,000,000 Jews living in Egypt around that time. Joseph knows they can blend in there where Herod has no jurisdiction.

In Egypt they remained. For maybe 8 – 12 years Jesus heard the language of the Egyptians. Other Jews spoke Hebrew and his native Aramaic with accents maybe different from his parents. He learned the customs of Jews in Egypt, and also listened as his parents longed for home. Egypt, you see, was a safe place, a waystation. When word travels to the Egyptian Jewish communities that the king who wanted Jesus dead is himself dead they pack up and return to Nazareth. For Jesus, called out of Egypt as Matthew says, this was a totally new place, and experience. What challenges would he face? How could it be home for him?

You may be wondering ~ how does this “out of Egypt” business relate to us? 2020 is, in a way, is kind of our Egypt. We, too, were in danger, not from deadly Herod but from a deadly virus. We moved overnight into a place of exile, not so much geographic but an exile in place, where we, too, had to get used to different customs such as wearing masks and not shaking hands. Our familiar places and usual pastimes, dining out, traveling, holidays with family and friends ~ all gone, with no idea of when we might return to them.. Just as word travelled to the Holy family of what Herod did to the two year olds and under in Bethlehem, we keep on learning of deaths and so much pain and suffering due to Covid-19.

Even as we learn of Covid deaths and suffering, we’ve done battle with our own shadowy emotions ~ anger, indifference, resentment over the ways we’ve been inconvenienced and all the changes of 2020 that will push their way into 2021 Those emotions are a significant part of our Egypt, truth be told.

Because we know so little of the Holy Family's flight/escape into Egypt and their time there, stories and legends have grown up alongside Matthew's brief account.

William Barclay shares one, in which Herod's soldiers are hot on the trail of the Holy family, tracing them to the entrance of a cave. When they dismount from their horses they see a spider web over the entrance. What's the possibility of anyone being beyond the web they think, so they move on.

When the pandemic began younger people were told that this year would be one with stories they would tell their grandchildren, as our parents and grandparents have told us of the great depression or times of war.

"Out of Egypt have I called my son." God called Jesus out for us. Out of 2020 God is calling you and me, for Jesus in a new year. What stories, will you tell as you reflect on your experience? What shadowy emotions must we continue to battle as new challenges come our way? And back to Barclay's spider, what holy and protective webs can we weave for those most vulnerable among us?

God of love and God of power, you have called us out for this hour, this month, this year we're calling 2021. Out of Egypt have I called my son. And it's as if God could be saying to us, "Out of 2020 I have called my children." So once again, we give ourselves to you, come what may. Amen and Amen.

Rev. Mary Gay McKinney