

The Rev. Josh Stephens
St. John in the Wilderness
Christmas 2
January 5, 2024

Matthew 2:13-23

After the wise men had left, 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." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

Incarnation: God's Power Revealed in Human Weakness

Christmas is a time for feasting together and I'm especially grateful for many wonderful dinners over this season this year, including the Potluck Feast we had a week ago and I'm sure tonight and tomorrow are going to be wonderful, also. At one of the dinners with my family, someone at the table was saying that they recently bought a condo in a big condo building in their city. The building has something like 300 units. A fairly large building by our small town standards. The condo building comes with all kinds of amenities like parking, a pool, workout facilities, and party rooms. But they also said each floor has something else special about it because each floor has someone living there who has a severe disability, such as cerebral palsy or multiple sclerosis. Actually the way it works is that *a local non-profit whose mission is housing for adults with severe disabilities owns these units so that their clients are able to live in their own home and in community with able-bodied people, rather than in an institution.* So everyone has a neighbor in this particular condo building who is especially unique and going through life rather differently.

As I was listening to this, I began to think about how it would not surprise me to learn that a condo building allowing this sort of arrangement could actually drive their property values down. It makes me recall a group home that was opening for adults with mental health issues in our old neighborhood in Virginia. There was quite an uproar at the prospect of being neighbors with people perceived as different. In the case of this condo building, it could cause an inconvenience to the facilities or require extra medical traffic perhaps, or it could be that some potential buyers would be turned off by living next to someone with a serious disease or disability. **But for Christians, I thought – for people who are citizens of God’s Kingdom and who are participants in God’s economy of wholeness and reconciliation – this arrangement would drive the value of living there *up, up, up* towards heaven!** It would give us a chance to share life with the beloved of God – to invest our time, our energy, our money differently and reap different dividends than what can be measured in account statements or property values.

During Christmastide, including on this final day of the season, my hope is that we consider deeply the mystery of the incarnation. Consider with me now this incredible Good News which is at the very heart of Christianity: God has come to be one of us and to be completely with us in Jesus Christ who was born 2000 years ago to Mary and Joseph. God would not stay away. **The love of God, the very nature of God, who God is, indeed God’s very self is to be with you and for you always.** This is why Christ our Savior was born.

In our Gospel reading today, we have a subtle but a quite important example of the depths of the Incarnation – of Emmanuel, God with us – because in this reading from Matthew we are told that the Holy Family fled for their lives *in the middle of the night* because King Herod was threatened by the power and the potential of this little child. In fact, in a terribly dark and violent turn during our Christmas recollections, we are told that he ordered all children who were born at that time in and around Bethlehem to be massacred. We know these children as the Holy Innocents whose martyrdom is remembered on December 28 each year.

So think about this with me: God enters the world in Jesus Christ but then his family must make a harrowing escape, forced to flee, due to political violence and instability. Hard to imagine how scary that must have been. Have you ever known someone whose bag was packed at all times because they didn’t know when they would need to grab it and run for their life? I have.

If we can step back from the horror of this story for a moment, then we might come to see that here God’s solidarity with broken humanity is expanded when God became a refugee fleeing for his life as a helpless infant carried by Joseph and Mary. The self-emptying love of God is even deeper than we thought possible.

God leaving heaven, longing to walk on earth,
from the strength of Spirit to the weakness of infant flesh.

The Logos who clinged not to equality with God but was born a human being.
Not in a palace but in a manger,
Not in Rome but Bethlehem,
Not with riches but into poverty,
Not with an army protecting him,
But fleeing from soldiers as a refugee.
Surely God is with us.

Surely God is with us as the one who wonderfully created us and yet more wonderfully restored the dignity of human nature so that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity. It's such a reversal of how we are supposed to add up life, or of how we are supposed to find meaning, or of what a "successful" life looks like.

That's what I hope we can consider this final day of Christmastide: the immeasurable greatness of God's power, as Ephesians says this morning, is revealed to us in one whose palace is a manger and whose throne is a cross. True greatness and true power comes to us in the vastness of the humility of God, and in our humility, too. Do you think that is something that Jimmy Carter figured out after he had climbed to the height of power in this land? One of his biographers said that Jimmy Carter was the only president to use the office as a stepping stone to greater things. People often disagree about his upward trajectory and his presidency, but they find incredible meaning and gratitude from his downward mobility on the other side.

As followers of this Jesus, we understand weakness differently. When you find yourself broken, when you find yourself afraid, when you find yourself mourning, when you're too weak to carry on, God's love for you has never been stronger. That is what I told hurricane victim after hurricane victim as we will discuss at formation today: that I am convinced that God is always with us but especially when we are fleeing for our lives. **As followers of Jesus, we understand weakness differently.**

And speaking of fleeing for our lives, did you know that in 2024 more than 10,000 migrants died in boats traveling from Africa to Spain with over 1500 of those being children drowned at sea – talk about Holy Innocents! We want to learn how to view things differently as Christians, like when we begin to see our enemies as people through whom God might give us the gift of forgiveness. Or when we see refugees and migrants – whether they are here from Mexico or Central America, or whether they are in Ukraine or Israel-Palestine or Sudan – we are looking into the face of Christ who fled for his life in complete solidarity with this humanity whom he so loves. That's because we understand weakness so very differently ever since God gave up power and privilege to be with us in our weakened and desperate state.

This downward mobility of God is the great Christmas mystery and it calls us to view so many things differently. God has entered into our human brokenness and weakness. This weakness is the very space where God's healing and strength reign supreme. As Christians, we call that *Incarnation*.