

*Home by Another Way*

Matthew 2:13-21

That text we read a few minutes ago is not part of the typical Christmas readings. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if you told me you've never heard this piece of the story before. But it comes just after a story we do tell every year—about the magi, astrologists from a foreign land who followed the light of an extraordinary star to the place where they found not the royal birth they thought they were tracking, but a child who had been born in a stable. They were so sure that this was the nativity they'd been looking for, that they left the same gifts they'd brought to offer a prince-who-has-everything: gold, fancy perfume, oils so rare that they never actually get used. These gifts must have seemed like silly, un-useful things, stacked in the corner of a studio apartment in a bad neighborhood where that child and his parents lived.

And then, the story takes this startling, sharp turn.

Joseph has another dream. Not like the first one, where he's told to go ahead and marry his pregnant fiancée. Kind of like the first one, because again Joseph is asked to step into something that has danger hovering around its edges. 'Get up,' this second angel says. 'Take your family and run. Run as fast and as far as you can go, because the King is about to search for your child. He wants to destroy him.'

Joseph and Mary and their child become refugees. Like all those border-occupiers in the news today, this little family slips out of their home in the middle of the night, carries only what they need to survive, says no good-byes to their neighbors. They leave the only place they know as home. They travel on their feet—no papers, no protection. They'll risk their lives and their child's life to arrive at a place where they will be only 'those people'. They'll dress differently from the residents, practice a different religion, celebrate different holidays. They'll have to look hard for the stores that carry the foods they're used to eating. They'll be accused of stealing other people's jobs, complicating community, wrecking the language.

And they will live there until it is safe to go home again. Because, really, who doesn't wish they could go home again?

And while Mary and Joseph and Jesus were away from Israel, the place they thought was home, our story says, Joseph's dream proved itself true. King Herod did in fact set out to eliminate every person who looked like their child. Anyone who fit the description, roughly. 'When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he was infuriated. He sent soldiers to kill all the children in and around Bethlehem, anyone who was two years old or under.' Jesus was not there. He was 'safe' in a refugee camp in Egypt. But a small generation of Jewish children was murdered, by order of a paranoid, insecure king.

This too is part of the Christmas story. This too is the world God lives in. Lived in, from the beginning.

I will tell you that archaeologists and historians have found no evidence of the kind of massacre that Matthew's story describes. What makes it worth talking about today is not history; it's that this is the story that shapes our identity as Christian people. The holy family as refugees in a foreign country and what classical painters called 'the slaughter of the innocents' are as much a part of the story of Christmas as are angels and shepherds and a manger and a great star in the sky.

What is that about?

Here you can really see the genius, the multi-layered meaning, of the biblical story. First: Where do Joseph and Mary escape to with their baby, go to find safety? Egypt. We know Egypt; our story has circled through this place before. The people of Israel, Jesus' people, once escaped *from* Egypt. Moses led them out of slavery there, on their way to the promised land—the land they are occupying when Joseph has his dream. 'Now go back to Egypt, so that your child will be safe,' the angel says. The land of promise has become the place where the life of God-with-us is threatened. The place of slavery becomes the place of safety.

God's presence is not about a *place*. It's something else.

Go back a little further in the story and you will hear more echoes. Moses, who led the people out of slavery, the one God found and chose to be the leader of his people: Do you remember the story of Moses' birth? Moses was born to an enslaved mother in Egypt. He was the great-grandchild of people who had immigrated to that place because of famine—danger—in their own land. By the time Moses' generation of Hebrew children were born, Pharaoh—another king—worried that the slave people were having so many children, soon they would outnumber the native Egyptians. And so Pharaoh instructed that every male Hebrew child be killed as soon as he was born, to limit the growth of that troublesome population. Another 'slaughter of the innocents.' Moses survived only through the resourcefulness of his mother, the courage of two midwives, the kindness of an Egyptian princess—who found him wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a basket. In Egypt. The place of slavery. The place where the child of God returns for safety.

This is a curious and complicated and intricately woven story that we come from.

This family over which a great star in the sky has come to rest, a family for which angels pour themselves out into extraordinary appearances, this family that has just received the homage of foreigners and gifts planned for royalty—now they have made a sharp turn, not toward grandeur, but toward dispossession. Now they must run for their lives. Travel looking over their shoulder. Identify with mothers who weep for their lost, anonymous children.

This too is the story of God's life among us. This too is our story.

The entry of God into human life does not bring unanimous welcome. It never has. God's promises, God's presence on earth, have always butted up against human resistance. Jesus' life, his teachings, his stubborn resistance to the established order, would be—will always be—an

irritant to human power. The person who was God-with-us will always be God-outside-of-us too, a stranger, an affront to life as we have known it. A life at-risk.

I have been thinking about light this week. Because this *Epiphany* Sunday is about light, but also because light is so much a theme of the Christmas story. It's the metaphor of this event, what it looks like for God to come and live among us. We said it many times in the lead-up to Christmas: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." In the first chapter of John's story of Jesus: "...his life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Later in John's story Jesus says, "I am the light of the world." In Matthew's account of Jesus, he says to the people, "You are the light of the world."

What happens when light is obstructed, when the path of light waves is blocked, or impeded? Does the light go out?

It does not. This is the amazing quality of light: it keeps doing its work. Not to draw your eyes toward its source or to blind you in its glare, but to illumine the things around it. Light is always changed by how it is received. It refracts; it changes direction. When light rays run into some material that slows their course, they bend. Light diffuses; light rays go around objects that get in their way, creating shadows. When the sun goes down here, its light is shining on another part of the earth. Light can be obstructed, but it cannot be extinguished.

And sometimes, light runs into a transparent, hospitable, collaborative thing—raindrops...a crystal...a piece of ordinary glass...and it breaks into the beauty of all of its parts.

Maybe, in a world full of resistance—that transparent, hospitable, and sometimes broken, thing...could be us.