



“The Journey is Home”

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Matt. 2:13-23 (NRSV)***

Today’s gospel pericope is one of the lesser known parts of the Christmas story, and yet this reading is a profound reminder that the meaning of the Christmas story is far more challenging and life-altering than most people—even life-long Christians—dare to imagine. Let us dig in and listen deeply for the story’s meaning.

The holy family’s flight to Egypt, the slaughter of the innocents, and the return to their homeland (Matthew 2:13-23) follow the Magi’s visit to the nativity. The mystical picture we imagine from childhood, based on the earlier verses in Matthew’s second chapter, turn ominous in verses 13 and following, when the Magi depart and Joseph is warned in a dream to get up and take his family to Egypt and stay there until further notice (2:13).

Matthew explains that this warning was an effort to spare the infant Jesus from Herod’s infanticide edict. Joseph did as the angel commanded. He took Mary and Jesus and fled to Egypt, where they stayed until Herod died, and until Joseph was again instructed in a dream by an angel, this time to get up and take the child and his mother back home.

Joseph complied with the angel’s instructions, with minor modifications. He gathered them up, and returned to Judah (where Jesus was born) and then kept on traveling north, to Nazareth of Galilee, presumably to get further from the reaches of Herod’s successor, Archelaus.

II

The holy family’s flight to Egypt, the slaughter of the innocents, and the return to Israel is an unpleasant story that we never include in children’s pageants, and rarely read as adults. Have you noticed? At best, we cover these stories once every three years, on the Sunday after Christmas, when they appear in the lectionary (as today), or when we study depictions of the life of Christ in Medieval and Renaissance art.

Despite the horror show presented in today’s pericope, which *is* part of the Christmas story, we cannot fully understand who Jesus was—at least for Matthew—without including and understanding these events as part of the Christmas story.

So what do we make of these nightmarish scenes in an otherwise serene progression of narratives in the Christmas story?

Theologians Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan say, in their book, *The First Christmas*, that the significance of these scenes—and the various gospels' Christmas stories writ large—are theological, not historical. In other words, their import is about *meaning*, not facts.¹

In the case of today's gospel, the Christmas story underscores that Jesus, for Matthew, was the *new Moses*.² Jesus, like Moses, was born a religious and political liberator, but the scope of Jesus' mission was larger than Moses' mission. Moses, for the Ancient Israelites, was liberator for the Jews. Jesus, for Matthew, by contrast, was liberator of both Jews and Gentiles.

The motif of Herod killing infant males in the Christmas story (Matthew 2) echoes the story of Pharaoh killing infant males in Egypt (Exodus 1 and 2). Moses grows up, accepts God's call, and leads the Hebrews out of slavery, through the wilderness, to the threshold of Canaan. Similarly, Jesus, in the gospel of Matthew, escapes a royal death sentence by fleeing with his family. In Jesus' case, the flight is *to* Egypt, rather than *from* Egypt, and Jesus later returns to Israel where he completes his divine mission.

In the stories about Moses and about Jesus, ancient audiences knew that kings committed all kinds of atrocities against their subjects, often as a means of control.³ Infanticide, for example, was one of the ways that kings reduced the ranks of their subjects and minimized the threat of an overthrow. In Matthew's gospel, the slaughter of the innocents is also explained as royal retaliation in response to the Magi's trickery. Herod made the wisemen promise to return from the nativity with a report on their findings, but they were warned in a dream of Herod's plot, and were persuaded to return to their home by a different route.

So biblically and theologically, we learn from Matthew that Jesus was like Moses, only even more important and more influential in that Jesus' liberation movement was launched on a global scale.

III

Now that we understand the theological significance of today's gospel reading, let's explore the significance of this reading for our time. What could this story have to do with modern times in general and with our lives in particular? I'll suggest three possible applications.

¹ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Birth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 33.

² For an excursus on Jesus as the new Moses, see Borg and Crossan, pp. 138-145.

³ Most often, the male children were killed, since they were considered potential soldiers who might revolt against the king or join forces with an invading army.

A) The flight to Egypt, the slaughter of the innocents, and the return home invite us to see the holy family in the faces of modern refugees, asylum-seekers, and undocumented immigrants and sanctuary seekers.

Mary and Joseph took a treacherous journey in the middle of winter, through a land and in a time that was inhospitable to people who were poor, who had little power, and who had formed families through unconventional means.

The holy family members were political, economic, and religious refugees and asylum seekers who fled from Judah to Egypt to escape the clutches of Herod the Great,⁴ the self-appointed “King of the Jews,” who had sworn allegiance to Caesar, and made a talisman of the edifices that he had constructed.

In every time, including our own, there have been and are people on the road—people headed to destinations not of their choosing—who look a great deal like the holy family.

According to a publication by Church World Service, an international mission partner of the United Church of Christ, the 2007 World Refugee Survey estimated that there are currently nearly 14 million refugees and asylum seekers and 21 million people displaced (within their own countries) throughout the world. All told, there are 35 million people right now who are in need of protection and assistance—35 million who are literally in the situation of the holy family. The largest group of refugees (3.2M) is Afghans, currently residing in Pakistan, Iran, the Russian Federation, and India.⁵

So today’s gospel reading helps us see the holy family in the faces of modern refugees, asylum-seekers, and undocumented immigrants and sanctuary seekers.

B) Today’s reading also invites us to see the holy family in the faces of spiritual refugees—including us.

War and famine produce the majority of the world’s political and economic refugees, while prejudice and parochialism have made and continue to make spiritual refugees of persons born within and beyond particular religious communities.

Many people who come to our congregation and denomination (the United Church of Christ) experience themselves/ourselves as “spiritual refugees”—as people who have fled for the sake of our souls from faith communities into which we were born; and we, like Joseph, have discerned a call to return home—though not to the exact venue from whence we came.

Some of us are here at Eden because we want to be part of a church where you don’t have to check your brains at the door. Some are here because we believe in equality for

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_the_Great

⁵ <http://churchworldservice.org/Immigration/stats.html>

all people; in other words, because we want to be part of an “Open and Affirming” congregation. Some others are here because we feel more at home with a covenantal-style polity in which major decisions are made by the membership rather than by a single religious leader or church bureaucracy outside of our local congregation. Still others of us are here because we resonate with the social teachings and positions of the wider United Church of Christ, and want to be part of a Christian community that is far different from the brand of Christianity presented in the media. And, many of us are here for several or all of these reasons I’ve stated and more.

Regardless of the particular reasons that we are here at Eden Church, most of us share a common identity as spiritual refugees, in our own kind of Galilee (in that we are not situated in our original spiritual homes), and we find ourselves in this venue trying to imagine, like Joseph, what and where (in God’s name) we may be called to do and to go—literally and spiritually.

So the flight to Egypt, the slaughter of the innocents, and the return home invite us to see the holy family in the faces of modern refugees, asylum-seekers, and undocumented immigrants and sanctuary seekers. This part of the Christmas story also invites us to see the holy family in the faces of spiritual refugees—including us.

C) And, these scenes from Matthew’s Christmas story remind us that parenting is a journey.

In Matthew’s gospel, Joseph is the protagonist. It is his, more than Mary’s or Jesus’ or the Magis’, whose journey is highlighted. This distinction is in sharp contrast to Luke’s gospel, which focuses on Mary’s experience of the journey.

Matthew’s gospel opens with the genealogy of Jesus, progressing from Abraham, the patriarch of Israel, to Joseph, the father of Jesus. Next, Matthew describes what some deem the “annunciation of Joseph,” in which Joseph is instructed by an angel about the things that are to happen and what his role is to be in them. In Matthew, the actual birth of Jesus is told with little fanfare, and then the story moves quickly to the visit of the Magi, in chapter two, followed by the angelic warning in today’s reading, the flight to Egypt, the infanticide, the angelic invitation to return home and the holy family’s response.

One of the most profound aspects of Matthew’s rendering of the Christmas story is the parabolic insights that it offers into parenthood, particularly fatherhood. These insights are rare as biblical narratives go. Despite much emphasis on patriarchy and lineage in the Bible, the scriptures rarely offer a peek into the psyche and souls of key father figures.

In Matthew, we see a father striving to discern God’s will for his life—challenged to counter social convention by staying with his pregnant fiancée, having nightmares about real-life threats to his family and his people, and making life and death decisions to secure his family’s welfare.

Matthew, better than all of the other gospel writers, and perhaps better than most contributors to scripture, demonstrates a kind of empathy for the emotional and spiritual trials of fathers.

In a day and an age when many parents feel that they are on journeys without maps, and the job description for dads and moms is in flux, we would do well to ponder Matthew's stories about Joseph and his empathy for fathers who, like Jesus' own father, strive to understand and respond to God's will, and to seek the wellbeing of their families, in and in spite of significant hardships on the road to refuge.

III

As I ponder Matthew's Christmas story in its entirety, and the travels that we take during the holidays, the thought occurs to me that not many of us are intrepid travelers. Most of us grow weary, sooner or later, of this Christmas-type travel. We are eager to get home, to sit by a warm fire, and to trade in our walking shoes for a pair of bedroom slippers.

Yet, ironically, the comfy-cozy Christmas that we may image or long for is not what we get from Matthew. Instead, we get a riveting tale reminding us that when the baby is born the journey has just begun, and it doesn't end until we go to God.

This ongoing journey reminds me of a phrase and the title of a book by feminist theologian, Nelle Morton,⁶ called *The Journey is Home*.⁷ In Morton's book, she explains that the mere production of the book challenged her to see her life, "...not as a journey with much unfinished business, but a journey in which the 'traveling' itself is home."⁸

I propose that Nell Morton's theme "the journey is home" is an apt way of summing up what Matthew's Christmas story is all about. It's about the truth that as people of faith we are always on a journey, so the journey is our home, and the good news is that God is with us on the way.

Matthew's gospel begins and ends with these themes. In Matthew 1:23, the author repeats the prophecy found in Isaiah 7:14, "'Look a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'"

Similarly, Matthew concludes his gospel with Jesus' promise of presence. In 28:20b, Jesus commissions the disciples on a mountain top saying, "...[R]emember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20b).

Friends, this is what Matthew's Christmas story is all about, and what our lives are all about: the journey is home, and God is with us on the way. Merry Christmas. Amen.

⁶ <http://www.answers.com/topic/nelle-katherine-morton>

⁷ Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

⁸ Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p. 177.