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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Second Sunday after Christmas
January 2, 2022

Lectionary Year C: Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a; Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

Often, imagery related to the Christmas story tends to conflate a number of elements from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. So, for example, when we read Luke's Christmas story, we don't get anything about the Wise Men or Magi who came from the East, because that is unique to the Gospel of Matthew. Also unique to Matthew is the account of the flight into Egypt, with this account regarded by some scholars as being of questionable historical accuracy. Did it really not happen because none of the other Gospels attest to it? Personally, I don't think that really matters, because Matthew, like his fellow evangelists -- Mark, Luke, and John -- intend to offer a persuasive account of Christ's time on Earth, with historical accuracy being a secondary concern.

Thus, you may not be entirely surprised to find out that the audience Matthew is persuading is primarily Jewish. Central to the story of Judaism, ancient and modern, is the Old Testament account of Joseph (and later his brothers) going to Egypt with great promise, only to eventually become oppressed by the Egyptian Pharaoh, which ushers in the leadership of Moses, who leads the exodus back to the Promised Land. One could then argue that Matthew, in an appeal to his audience, replicates this account in his Gospel, with another Joseph taking his wife and the infant Jesus away to Egypt, except that this time Egypt is a place of refuge from King Herod's planned infanticide.

Of course, a Jewish audience would've heard of Herod's plans in Matthew's Gospel and been immediately reminded of Pharaoh's dealings with the Israelites in Egypt. Furthermore, Matthew connects his account of Jesus' return from Egypt with Old Testament prophecy. Looking, in particular, to Hosea, chapter 11, verse 1, we can find the words, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." I honestly believe that a faithful Jewish person would regard this as a rather ham-fisted cut-and-paste of prophecy onto the story of Jesus; yet, as a Christian, I can see how Matthew's desire to cast Jesus into a prophecy-and-fulfillment schema -- the prophets of old and Jesus fulfilling their prophecy -- is for the sake of convincing Jewish people of his time that Jesus is the real deal.

What is pivotal to the story, though, is the appearance of the angel to Joseph, who says to him in a dream, "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" (Matthew 2:13). The historical accuracy of this event notwithstanding, we clearly see one of God's messengers offering God's protection and faithfulness in the midst of a severe threat to Jesus' life. Jesus was, after all, an infant and nowhere close to accomplishing what he came to Earth to do. This morning's text omits verses 16 through 18, however, which details the slaughter of all infants in the Bethlehem vicinity. Thus, if you're anything like me, you wonder why God's protection and faithfulness didn't apply to them. Traditionally, these omitted verses would appear in

the Gospel text for Holy Innocents Day, which is December 28th on the liturgical calendar; this observance often serves as a broader remembrance of all who perished through the abuses of tyranny and injustice.

It's strange to think that God's protection and faithfulness extends to some but not all. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were, in this case, part of the "some." If we were to bring out a good five-dollar theology word for this moment, one of the best of these words would be theodicy -- T-H-E-O-D-I-C-Y. Theodicy grapples with problems of evil in the world, in spite of the understanding that God is good and does not willingly inflict harm on his children. The Christian tradition, in general, borrowing heavily from St. Augustine, tends to place the onus on human beings when it comes to evil. In the case of Herod and his desire to murder the infant Jesus, we see someone who has misused the gift of free will -- in this example, to concoct and execute an evil scheme. God may intervene, but there are no guarantees. God is perfectly free to do as God chooses, as well, apart from doing evil, which God would never do!

This may seem a bit cold, but, if anything, it's a guard against bad theology. Bad theology, among its many faults, too often looks to God as a divine lifeguard who can get anyone out of any imaginable problem. So, if you've done something wrong, or if someone's wronged you, God, in such instances, should intervene. Or maybe God here might be more of a divine repairman rather than a lifeguard. But, the responsibility, regardless of what has happened,

always rests on you or the person who has wronged you. It's not God's job to clean up after the messes we make.

The only time when God really did that was in sending us his Son Jesus Christ. That is an example of God's grace, which is all we can hope for from God, especially when we screw up. Such a reality echoes through the words of our Second Reading from Ephesians, particularly these: "He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will" (1:5). That which is good -- like God giving us grace in Jesus Christ -- is that which we look to God for. That which is not good cannot be attributed to God, and can only be attributed to a fallen humanity. But, in addition to that, God does not will our failure, as if he's up there in heaven waiting to cast us into the flames of hell; rather, God, much like he offered his protection and faithfulness to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, wants to deliver us from that possibility.

Gary Larson's comic The Far Side, which was a fixture of the cartoon pages of my youth, probably contributed more than I'd care to admit to my warped sense of humor...and to my theology. A particularly memorable image from The Far Side is that of a man walking obliviously down a sidewalk with an upright piano hoisted precariously above him. This image appears on the computer screen of none other than God Almighty. The caption underneath reads "God at His computer," and God has his right index finger hovering over the keyboard just above the key marked "SMITE."

I assure you that The Far Side is in no way representative of my

theology, but this particular piece captures a popular misconception about God...namely, that God is up in heaven waiting to inflict some sort of calamity or hardship (or death) on people.

When I see an account like that of the flight into and the return from Egypt, I am led to think more of the ways God can offer us "refuge and strength" than of the ways he can bring trouble upon us. I also cannot imagine how belief in a God who is a devious manipulator would be very assuring or comforting. From the headlines, we read of the devastating wildfires in Colorado, and pray for the safety and protection of all affected...but in no way is this "God's will," as much as my finite mind can conceive of an infinite God. And God can end a wildfire about as much as God can start a wildfire; therefore, our prayers are offered for those on the ground either suffering through or helping to extinguish these awful fires that are ravaging Colorado.

That said, it's worth noting again that it's a bit presumptuous to ask God to fix problems that he didn't necessarily create. Instead, let's let God be God -- faithful, just, and always open to hear our cares, cries, and concerns. God will not "fix" every problem we name, but God will suffer with us through whatever fix we're in. Proof positive of this is God's sending of his Son Jesus Christ, who became like us in every way but sin, both to show us a better way, and to offer God's compassion and mercy through his suffering on the cross.

It is God's will that we should receive the fruits of that. Amen.