

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Second Sunday after Christmas
January 3, 2021

Lectionary Year B: Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

The arrival of a new year naturally brings us all a sense of hope and possibility, and, given the fact that we've just exited one of the most disastrous years in modern memory, we're likely thinking that we can only go one direction at this point...and that is up. The year 2020 was a long and treacherous nightmare from which no one could seem to awaken. Right now, we're not far enough into 2021 to know if the nightmare is over yet, or when it will be over. Personally, I'm trying to remain optimistic about the new year and, of course, the long-awaited end of the pandemic.

Getting back to nightmares, I remember that, as a kid, a really bad dream usually contained these elements -- some big, scary thing (whether man, machine, or monster), and a seemingly endless chase scene, where the man, machine, or monster was after me. As I got older, I somehow developed the ability to control my dreams more, so, while dreaming, I could remind myself that it was only a dream and wake up whenever I wanted. But, until I was able to do that, I was stuck with what seemed to be very long chase scenes from which it was very difficult to awaken.

Were it possible to spring out of the nightmare that was 2020 by reminding ourselves that it was only a dream, I can't imagine any of us turning down the chance to do that. Another option that I brought up for myself was, at the beginning of the Covid crisis, having me sedated and brought out of sedation only when it was all over. No one took me up on that, however, so here I am now having lived through it with you alert and oriented. In retrospect, that was the right thing to do.

Being forced to run from something you can never quite escape basically sums up my childhood nightmares and, to a lesser extent, the year 2020. Relating to the pandemic, the virus was the one thing you didn't want to have catch you, because despite what some might think, it wasn't (and still isn't) the mythical stuff of childhood nightmares. Also, travel restrictions have made it impossible to run off to a Covid-free place like New Zealand; instead, the only places we could escape to were our homes, where many of us found out that cabin fever is real.

I find it rather fitting that this morning's Gospel text features Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus escaping to Egypt. It's so basic: When your life is in danger, get out of harm's way. But to the attentive reader, this text is filled with echoes of the Old Testament, especially those of the journey of another Joseph in Genesis, chapter 46. That Joseph went to Egypt, too, accompanied by the Israelites and at Pharaoh's invitation. We know, however, that things didn't turn out so well when they got down there. Knowing that, one can't help but notice the irony of Matthew's presentation of Egypt as a place of refuge, but, given his inclination toward making his Gospel sound as Jewish as possible, a flight into Egypt would be a perfect Old Testament point of reference to include in the story of Jesus. It is, however, regarded as historically inaccurate.

Matthew's Gospel (understandably) exercises great care in reminding its readers that Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In our text for today, this is obvious in both verse 15 and verse 23. Naturally, in appealing to a Jewish audience, there is almost a "see I told you so" tone in much of the Gospel. Matthew must draw heavily on the Old Testament to prove that Jesus is the promised Messiah. This assumes that Jews are inclined to reject such an idea, but Matthew and others apparently convinced a sufficient number of Jews to make them a substantial influence in early Christianity. As a case in point, there was considerable controversy, as evidenced in Paul's letter to the Galatians, over whether or

not one must first become Jewish before one could become Christian.

The answer was, of course, "No." One did not have to become Jewish in order to become Christian. It was considered helpful, however, in Matthew's Gospel to emphasize the continuity of the faith from the "old" into the "new."

Beyond these rather technical matters is the horrifying backdrop of Herod's slaughter of children under two years old. Much of that story is omitted from our text, however. For a bit more context, I would remind you that Herod employed something of a carpet bombing strategy; he was after the infant Jesus so he ordered the murder of all infants. Eventually, according to his sick and twisted logic, he would take out Jesus. But with Joseph, Mary, and Jesus in Egypt, this would be prevented. According to our text, they returned to Israel after Herod had died (Matthew 2:20-21).

Herod was a jealous ruler, alarmed by the prospect of Jesus competing for power and attention. The Magi, traditionally known as the Three Wise Men, came looking for Jesus, and Herod attempted to trick them into divulging Jesus' location after they had visited him. In a dream, they were warned against doing this, and so they didn't go back to Herod. The sparing of Jesus is thought to recall the sparing of Moses in the book of Exodus; Pharaoh wished to kill all Israelite infant boys, ordering them to be thrown into the river, but Moses was placed in a basket and floated instead. Again, these Old Testament echoes in the Gospel of Matthew are usually thought to be literary devices rather than historically accurate data.

But that doesn't make Matthew's Gospel useless. On the contrary, the point of these stories is to show us God's faithfulness to and care for his people. Notice how this happens, though -- tragedy is real but that which is good and just ultimately prevails. There's no bypassing of all things cruel and gruesome; in fact, it is often in the worst of times that God's faithfulness and care is most pro-

foundly revealed. God hears the cries of those who suffer harm, brutality, injustice, and pain; God indeed comforts them with his presence, too. When God swept the Holy Family off to Egypt, it was an offering of protection not entirely unlike that which we beseech God for in times like this. In my allusion to nightmares earlier, I mentioned how I used to be running from something scary from which I couldn't seem to escape. The only conclusion here was awakening from the nightmare. In this morning's text, there's some running involved for sure, but the Holy Family finally flees to refuge.

In our case, where's everything going? Is it to refuge or simply to more running? That might depend upon whom or what we call upon -- God or our own gut instincts and wishes. It takes a modicum of humility to admit that we need to call upon a higher power when everything in us can't quite get us through. Think of our prideful instincts to trust in our own strength when, in fact, we often need God's strength. And when we're confronted with crisis and pandemic, only God can bring us refuge and solace. If you keep running without God, the nightmare will never end. With God, the nightmare may not end immediately, but there will always be a glimmer of hope.

There will be a glimmer of hope because we hear of God's faithfulness and care and they become real for us and with us. God gives us wisdom and perspective and reveals to us where we're headed -- to communion with him. Knowing that, we realize that the nightmares of this world aren't forever. This good news is a God-given gift that remains with us always. No one or no thing can take that away from us. "A dream instead of a nightmare?", one might ask.

No! It's reality.

And that's the best reality we can enjoy when fleeing to New Zealand isn't an option. God is with us when we stay in place just as he is when we're journeying.

And sometimes the best way to stay out of harm's way is not to flee, but to shelter. The Psalmist says, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (46:1). God has proven this again and again by his faithfulness to and care for his people -- from the Israelites, to Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, to the early Christian Church, and to us and beyond. Even nightmares come to an end, and it is God who has the power to end them. If we're running anywhere, we can be assured that God is running with us. If we're sticking around and waiting, we can be assured that God is sticking around and waiting with us. Think again of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus and of how they were given refuge from Herod's infanticide, and pray for that same sort of refuge today. God will surely grant it.

Amen.