

2 Christmas 2022
Sermon for January 2, 2022
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Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico

Jeremiah 31:7-14
Psalm 84
Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a
Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

“After the wise men had left...”

The lessons we read today on this Second Sunday after Christmas are often omitted when the lectionary is caught between the Feast of the Holy Name, which we celebrated yesterday, and the Feast of the Epiphany, which we'll celebrate on Thursday.

Today we hear that the family who arrived in Bethlehem as pilgrims will continue their pilgrimage.

The Psalmist paints a picture of the life of the Holy Family in the days following the recognition of his star-marked birth by the Magi.

Happy are the people whose strength is in you! *
whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way.
Those who go through the desolate valley will find it a place of springs, *
for the early rains have covered it with pools of water.
They will climb from height to height, *
and the God of gods will reveal himself in Zion.
Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer; *
hearken, O God of Jacob.
Behold our defender, O God; *
and look upon the face of your Anointed.

We sang of the Anointed on Christmas Eve.

Silent night, Holy night
All is calm, all is bright
Round yon virgin, mother and child
Holy infant, tender and mild
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace,

But that silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright,
does not last long for Joseph, Mary and the baby.

After we hear from the shepherds and the Magi,
the first Christmas turns dark and resonates with the long history of Israel
to connect Jesus with Moses.

On that silent night, Joseph is awakened from a troubled sleep after being
warned by an Angel of the LORD that the infant Jesus is in grave danger.

We read of the threat on Wednesday at the Feast of the Holy Innocents:

*“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:
Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled,
because they are no more.”*

Rachel was the second wife of Jacob, who was re-named Israel by YHWH.
Writing at the time of the Babylonian exile,
Jeremiah imagines Rachel as the maternal icon who mourns for her children,
praying for an end to suffering and exile.

In his dream, the Angel tells Joseph to take his family and flee to Egypt,
where the story of Israel began.

Egypt – where Pharaoh ordered the murder of all Hebrew baby boys.
Egypt – where Moses was the only survivor of that first genocide.
Egypt – from where Moses led the people to the promised land.

It is ironic that Egypt is now a safe haven for Jesus and his family,
who have become refugees seeking asylum
from the violence and danger in their home country.

In Egypt there are large Jewish colonies who have thrived
in the diaspora of the two exiles forced by first Assyria and then Babylon.
It is in one of these communities that Joseph and his family
probably find a home and Jesus grows under the tutelage of Joseph.

Joseph's calling from God was not an easy one.
He was tasked to be the earthly father of Jesus,
which required him to ignore rumors and insinuations early on.

He had the often-dangerous duty of protecting the child Jesus from harm.
According to tradition, priestly Zechariah, the father of John,
who would become the baptizer, was slain by Herod's soldiers
because he would not reveal the whereabouts of his son.
A similar fate would have fallen on Joseph and, in all likelihood, Mary.

Joseph had a weighty role as they fled.
In addition, it fell to Joseph to administer the routine discipline
and to teach his son a trade, and to be a role model of a good man.

More importantly, Joseph was called to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit,
which may have been strangest part of Joseph's career.
Whenever a major change happened,
Joseph received his instructions in a dream.

Joseph found nothing odd about being instructed through his dreams.
In his day, dreams were routinely accepted as messages from God.

Dream interpretation is part of biblical tradition.
Jacob dreamed of angels ascending and descending from Heaven.

Joseph interpreted dreams for Pharoah and saved his people
Daniel is able to tell Nebuchadnezzar his dream and is honored.

My grandfather, the one for whom my father and I were named,
Believed in dreams as a way of deciding what to do.
I remember once he was trying to decide
whether to attend a funeral for a distant relative.
He said he'd sleep on it.
The next day he confided he'd dreamed of the funeral.
He had not seen himself among the people, and he concluded
it was God's way of telling him not to go.

However, today, because of our enlightened culture,
we tend to place dreams in a different category outside of reason.
In all likelihood, we would reject the idea of receiving reliable guidance
in our dreams.

After all, we live in an evolved society,
in a world graced with technology.
We depend on our technology to see us through any circumstance.

Today God's warning to Joseph would come as an Amber alert
that would wake us from our dreams with its alarm.
We look at our dreams like movies or stories, not as divine insights.

The notion of walking into the office some morning,
and announcing that we've reached a decision
based on a dream we had last night – not so much.

Never mind that we get wonderful ideas from our dreams.
Never mind that major breakthroughs have come
from ideas that sprouted in a dream.

Despite our inherent skepticism, we cannot help but dream.

Without dreams, there would be no art, there would be no music;
there would be no theater, no movies or TV.

Without dreams, we would relegate our future choices
to decision trees and lists of pros and cons,
and we would decide outcomes based on probabilities or likelihoods.

Our lives are determined by our free choices.
We often base our decisions on what's best for us or for others who love us.
God expects us to do that.
But more often than not, we wonder,
 “What does God want me to do?”

In that mindset, it seems like there must be only one right choice to make,
and we have to be sure to make the correct one or all is lost.

God is not like that.
God nudges us forward toward choices,
and frequently multiple choices confront us.
All the choices we face may be equally right.
It's just that we must choose.

That is the message of today's Gospel.

In the Collect for this Sunday
we praise God for having “wonderfully created,
and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature.”

Human nature includes many things,
but at its best our nature includes
freedom, choices, fulfillment, and joy.

As the Psalm concludes today:

- 11 No good thing will the Lord withhold *
 from those who walk with integrity.
12 O Lord of hosts, *
 happy are they who put their trust in you!

Amen.