

## The Trip of Your Lifetime (Matthew 2:13-23)

If things are feeling rather anti-climatic for you on this day after Christmas, let's remind ourselves that today is actually only the second day of Christmas; and thus it has ten more days to go, this season of hope and of help, during a time when we seem to especially need both.

One of my favorite Christmas movies is *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, based on the Charles Dickens' classic; and when the ghostly Marley brothers appear to Scrooge in a dream with a warning about his future, the old curmudgeon blames his vision on a partially digested bit of beef, and defiantly declares, "There's more of gravy than of grave about you!"

As we see in today's text, however, St. Joseph was more respectful of the supernatural messenger who appeared to him in *his* dream. Dream interpretation was an important aspect of spiritual insight to the ancient Hebrews; and when, three times in ten verses a supernatural visitor appears to Joseph with a warning about his future, we see that Joseph wastes no time in trying to determine if the source of the dream was digestive, emotional, or spiritual: He rouses his family and they flee to Egypt.

We don't know how long the Holy Family had been in Bethlehem at that point. But the nativity scenes which show the angels and the shepherds and the three wise men gathered simultaneously around the manger are more than likely not fully accurate; some scholars think that Mary and Joseph may have remained in Bethlehem until Jesus was a toddler, where they could have support from Joseph's relatives. After all, they had had an exhausting journey on foot while Mary was in the last days of pregnancy; their lodging had been of the most rustic sort; and the skies exploding with news of the Savior's birth, while exciting, must have also made them realize that, in a very real way, the fate of the world now rested on their shoulders.

But whether they had resided in Bethlehem for weeks or for months, at some point they must have longed for the familiar scenes and daily routine of the life in Nazareth they had left so suddenly. Even in modern times, no matter how much we love visiting with relatives during the holidays, we do eventually want to go back home. I think this was very true for my father, especially during the one Christmas trip our family took to visit his family back in 1960, when I was six years old: During the course of this journey, my parents came down with the Hong Kong 'flu and were bedridden in the motel for several days with three young children with a different type of fever, cabin fever. Running around the room one morning, I tripped and put a serious gash in my brow that required a trip to the emergency room. After our visit, on the way back, our 1949 DeSoto broke down completely, and had to be replaced with the 1957 Chevy station wagon which served us faithfully for many years.

We never left home for the holidays again. And even when my father was no longer farming and we took our vacations when school was out in the summer, he preferred camping trips close to home rather than long road trips to visit either side of the family; and who could blame him? Mary and Joseph must surely have been going through something similar after they arrived in Bethlehem on that first Christmas trip: in an instant, their lives had been turned upside down, and all they may have wanted to do was get back home at some point in the future when Mary was recovered.

But as we read in today's text, instead of heading back to Nazareth, as arduous as that itself would have been, they have now been directed, in no uncertain terms, to flee to Egypt—another long journey on foot and in completely the wrong direction, leaving family and friends to an uncertain and even tragic fate. And while there were settlements of Jewish people in Egypt, Joseph and Mary would still be entering a pagan land where they knew no one—and for an undetermined amount of time. As far as they knew, they might never be allowed to go home again at all; and certainly not while Herod lived.

Even after he died, the family had to take a circuitous route back to Nazareth to avoid his regent, who was notoriously cruel.

How long did they stay in Egypt? Some scholars use Revelation 12:6 as an indicator, where the dragon chases the woman and her baby into the wilderness and she stays there for 1260 days or about three and a half years. Estimates vary, but by the time the family finally did make their way back to Nazareth, Jesus could have been anywhere from four to six years old.

Yet even as they longed for home through those difficult years away, one promise of God that Joseph and Mary must have kept in their hearts during this constant chaos, was that God would never leave them nor forsake them—a promise that shows up in both the Old and New Testaments. So when the angel Gabriel had first told Mary “Fear Not” all those months earlier, his admonition was not only for a frightened girl at that particular moment, it was for all the believers in her son who would come afterwards down through the centuries. For not only will God never leave us nor forsake us, but in Christ, he had come to earth to actively fight for us.

And yet, as we also see in today's passage, even Joseph at one point was still afraid; after their roundabout route back home, what would it have been like returning to Nazareth after six years? Had a family member kept Joseph's home? Did he have to set up a different carpentry shop? Had friends and family moved on? Had anyone heard the news about their son? Did the locals believe it? We cannot know; but it does seem that these seriously intense and difficult trips may have taken their toll on Joseph, for after the Christmas and Epiphany narratives, he no longer appears in any text, and it is his adopted son who seems to be his mother's protector.

Even when Joseph and Mary were back home, however, they certainly realized that their daily lives would not be the same; for when you are the parental guardians of the Savior of the world, life, and

how you looked at life, was going to be different. How different the Scriptures do not say; and it would have been stabilizing for the family if their daily routine went on as usual; so Joseph continued his woodworking to feed his family and keep a roof over their heads, probably educating Jesus in the family trade. He is not mentioned at the wedding at Cana, when Jesus performs his first miracle; yet Mary seems to have an inkling that something different is about to happen; and that indeed, ever since that fateful birth which had divided mankind's calendar into BC and AD, life would never be normal again.

Of course, grief and travail have never paid much attention to calendars, either BC or AD, as we have all recently seen. At the end of 2020, people said farewell to the year with a sigh of relief; yet as 2021 opened, the nation's Capitol building was smashed and ransacked; and as 2021 closes, the pandemic we thought we might be seeing the back of has spun around and come charging back to life.

And so most of us are, perhaps like Mary and Joseph in exile, longing now for the days of normalcy. But in America, we may sometimes forget that our comfortable, stable, way of life has only been around for about 75 years, since the end of WW II. Prior to that the world not only suffered through the first world war, but then had to struggle with a deadly pandemic, a massive economic depression, and then another world war. For much of that time, social security and unemployment benefits did not exist. If you retired without adequate savings, were laid off, or injured on the job, you were at the mercy of your relatives; and if you had no relatives, or at least any relatives with mercy or with money, you depended on charity or moved to the county poor house.

After the war, however, America became “normalcy nation”: Steady, dependable, with opportunities for many, even though civil rights and social justice still had to battle with racism. People from around the world migrated from poorer and more repressed countries to become part of us. And we had our ups

and downs, our relative stability has lasted for many decades. But now our normalcy seems to be shaking and shifting: We must deal almost daily with angry politics and a still pervading pandemic; the stock market is up one moment, and plunging the next. Many people put their travel plans on hold this year. Which is why it came as a bit of a surprise when last week I received an advertisement for a contest in which I could, and I quote, “Win the trip of your lifetime”, to which I wanted to respond wryly, believe me, my lifetime seems to be one continual trip, especially this year.

But I think that is what Mary and Joseph also realized: that whether they were being chased by a maddened king as they fled with the Savior of the world in their care, or quietly settled in Nazareth, life is a journey; which means that, whether you are a poor family in Palestine 2000 years ago, or a comfortable American Christian in 2021, our security is not in “normalcy”; not in a place or a location or a certain standard of living. Our security is in God, who will never leave us nor forsake us; and who will allow us, like St. Joseph, to be afraid even as we turn to him, again and again. Because he himself knows what it is like to frail, cold, weak, human, and on the run when things were no longer normal.

In times of stress and duress, however, it is hard to remember this; and in our journey of life, walking with God can be hard; we may even try to walk away from him; but how can we walk away from he who is omnipresent? Which is a good thing; because when we stumble and fall, he is there to pick us up; our progress may even be slowed to a crawl; but God sees our heart and will give us courage.

Johann Christoph Arnold writes in his essay, “Be Not Afraid” that “Fear not!” was more than an instruction to the people to whom the Christmas angels appeared, to ally their paralyzing terror. It was also, he writes, “a declaration of war on fear. The “glad tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people” meant that fear's grip on human hearts was going to have to give way to the far greater power of love.”

Sharing that love can be as simple as wearing a mask, or picking up groceries for those with pre-

existing conditions; for at its most basic level, love is seeing and caring for the needs of others. Which is also why, for so many people, home is where they often see love in action the most. The ancient proverb tells us that “Home is where the heart is”; but when our heart is focused on the love of God, and the sharing of that love, then we are indeed at home, no matter where in the world the trip of our lifetime may take us.