

DELIVERED AT PLYMOUTH CHURCH OF SHAKER HEIGHTS, U.C.C.

“Enriched by the Journey”

GOSPEL READING: Matthew 2:13-23

Threat, danger, and even death are the menacing tones in the dark passage we read this morning from the Gospel of Matthew. The entire story gives a sense of drivenness. At some points it seems even contrived. In fact, it ends with a forced reference based on a false etymology between “Nazareth” and “nazorean.” But no matter: the real subject is God’s hand in the costly, tortuous process of setting the stage for Jesus Christ.

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "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." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

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: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

SERMON:

It makes you dizzy, what happens in the section of the Gospel we read today on this Sunday between Christmas and New Year’s, the last Sunday of the year. It’s a mélange of multiple dreams, and constantly getting up in the middle of the night, and moving first in one direction, then another, always just ahead of disaster. Things are swirling around – and everything seems to end up just about where it all started.

But not quite. All the action verbs in the story of Joseph – and it is Joseph’s story; Mary is not even mentioned by name – all the action verbs reflect a chain of events which kept the Good News alive. “Get up. Take. Go.” Those repeated commands to Joseph, and his repeated instantaneous responses (though maybe not always willing responses), kept the possibility of a new era alive by keeping Jesus alive. “Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt... Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.” Following their round trip to the Nile valley and back a new chapter in the story of God’s dealing with humankind was ready to begin. (Although going down to Egypt is the hard way to travel the, what?, fifty-some miles from Bethlehem to Nazareth.) Still, in the course of all this hustle, and sleeplessness and moving in circles, something vital was accomplished, after all.

I’m tempted to say my life has felt a little like that merry-go-round this past week. Things swirling around – and ending up just about where I started. But not quite. As I pack my car again for a 698-mile trip I am aware that I am not where I started, and neither are you. We are at a different place. The story we live as individuals, and as Christians, and as Plymouth people has moved in new directions. The story we are has taken new turns, and I believe we are richer for this portion of our journey.

And richer in a number of ways. I am deeply aware that I leave with some wonderful gifts from Plymouth Church. I leave with a renewed sense of the life-giving possibilities inherent in the Christian enterprise. It can sometimes seem, even for someone who is closely involved and concerned with the Church of Jesus Christ, as am I, that we move at an often heavy-footed, plodding pace. It can sometimes seem, when you consider the apparent absurdities that can make people outside the church scratch their heads and wonder (and even people inside the church scratch their heads and wonder), that we aren’t really going anywhere. Yet the awkward ways we sometimes live out who we are and who we are called to be still carry the potential of creating community. Certainly community, real community, is one of the crying needs of our country and our world, and we in this communion, with our heritage of a participatory style, are in a unique position to perfect the practice of community. This venture embodies as well the potential of lives transformed, hearts healed, courage renewed, good news shared, hope made real. You have made that clearer for me, and I thank you.

I leave also with a sense of awe at the gifts of God lavished on us, lavished on each one of us and lavished on the life of Plymouth Church, gifts that are so evident in our life together this year. In whatever direction you look around here you can see friends and fellow members exercising God-given capabilities, and doing that through our various missions and ministries as a people of God, because they care about Plymouth Church and the Good News we can be for the world.

So my time with you has been heartening for me, whatever it may have been for you.

Our Gospel reading ends with Joseph and the Child and his Mother in a different place than where they started. After this moment we never hear about Joseph again in the course of the Gospel. He's gone. But of course this transition from Bethlehem to Egypt and back to Nazareth is only the beginning of the Good News. The story of salvation is poised for a grand new step, for signs and wonder, healing and resurrection, truth and light. I believe your journey as Plymouth Church, United Church of Christ, is also poised for a new step. My gratitude to all who have been free to be part of the journey these last fifteen months; all it takes is the freedom to show up. And my prayers for a future blessed with the richest gifts God in Christ can give.