

Christmas 2, Year B, 2021

Jesus and St. Peter are at the Pearly Gates, and there's a long line of souls waiting to get in. Jesus spots an old man, and says to Peter, "He looks familiar." When the old man finally gets to the front, Jesus asks, "Excuse me, sir. Where do you come from?" The old man says, "Oh, I come from a land by the sea." "Hmmm...what did you do there?" Jesus asks. "I was a carpenter," replies the old man. Jesus, growing excited, asks, "Did you have a son?" The old man answers, "Well, some say I did, some say I didn't." Jesus jumps up, spreads his arms, and says, "Father?" The old man squints for a moment and says, "Pinocchio?"

Today we read from Mathew's gospel about how the Holy Family escape Herod and his son who ruled after him, to settle in Nazareth after spending some time in Egypt. It's quite a story and Joseph features prominently. Or was that Geppetto? Who knows? And if you think that was funny, who knows is if we have actually reached 2021. After all Herod died 4 BCE so if Jesus was alive while Herod was alive it may really be 2016 and we may have to relive the last 4 years. What a world and what a story.

Sometimes what we have in scripture takes some delving into if we want to have a sense of what's going on and what it might mean for our lives, but the details of this story speak for themselves if we have ears to listen and eyes to see. I've mentioned Herod. He was a king only by permission from Rome and he is known to have done well keeping the peace typically through brutality, for construction projects, and making sure Rome received their taxes. He was Jewish but not descended directly from a line of Jews and it has been recorded that one of his sons said it was safer to be his pig than a member of his family. This is the one hunting after Jesus and we can see his fear and jealousy clearly in the story. To the early Christian simply saying Herod would have raised alarms. The contrast drawn is between a traitor who has abused his own family and people to enrich himself and the Great Shepherd of the flock, Jesus Christ. Herod is a petty, earthly king but Jesus is the King of all kings, far outshining him even as an infant.

To escape this monster, the Holy Family flee to Egypt. This is obviously not Israel so they are foreigners in a foreign land and as Jews this particular land had quite a bit of significance. They are returning to the scene of the crime as it were. Moses returns to Egypt to save his people from a different evil King and the parallels are striking to one who knows both stories. Christians will recount the story of Pharaoh and the Passover even today as we refer to Jesus as the Paschal Lamb. It is important to note that Jesus is raised in his infancy as a refugee – a political refugee. We might ponder this as we consider the plight of refugees at home and abroad.

Lastly, it is important to mention the wise men or Maggi. At Epiphany they will be the focus but we catch a brief glimpse of them this week as they exit the story. They are simply from the east. Which has significance much like Egypt, referring to the Babylonian empire and the freedom given the Jews by the Persians. Very much a parallel story. Being from afar, they are certainly not Jews but acknowledge the divinity of Jesus as well as his lordship: where is the King of the Jews? And they are special enough to gain access to Herod's court. In many ways, these foreigners are superior to Herod, a Jew and a king.

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Foreigners, refugees, and a king... These details create contrasts which draw our attention to the plight of Jesus and invite us to wonder about the role power plays in shaping the lives of the powerless. They invite us to wonder what true power is and what it means to really be a ruler or to have power. But they don't let us stop there because in contrast to the horrible plight of the Holy Family at the hands of King Herod, we also find hope in the newborn savior. He will be a true shepherd to all people and especially those who have wandered or strayed and those who have been pushed to the margins by the rich and powerful. This not simply a story of contrasts but a story of hope.

And as we begin a new year in the time of a pandemic, we might allow this story to inspire us to look for hope in our time like the hope we find in Matthew's gospel. Perhaps if we have ears to listen and eyes to see we will find some. We have the first female vice president who is mixed race. We will have our first Native American woman run the Department of the Interior. Only a few months ago our country erupted in protests to say enough is enough with racism, particularly against African Americans and some legislation has been enacted to curb the effects of racism on policing. Gay marriage is the law of the land. We are no longer tolerating intolerance as we have for centuries and even since the successes of the Civil rights movement. Indeed the arc of justice is long but we have seen it take a steeper curve than usual lately and it shows that God is at work protecting the sheep. We do have a great Shepherd of the flock and we are being renewed day by day, growing closer to the divine because of the humanity of Jesus Christ.

And I am grateful as a Christian that the Word is getting out more and more that the love of God in Jesus Christ finds its greatest manifestation in the words of the Magnificat: He has shown the strength of his arm; he has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty, for he has remembered his promise of mercy. We see this in the words and witness of Pete Buttigiege, the first openly gay candidate for president who spoke boldly and eloquently about his faith as an Episcopalian, giving us the witness of one who embraces Christianity as a way of life which feeds the hungry and helps the poor and disenfranchised above all. The witness of Reverend Barber who has courageously been leading the Poor People's Campaign for so many months with greater and greater success. We have a Christian voice in our society pointing to the words of the Magnificat, put on the lips of Mother Mary for all to pray and sing, that we might have her witness with and through us. The witness of one who says yes to God, for herself, for her son, and for us all.

These are incredible times to be living through, whether it's really 2016 all over again or 2021 and if we open our eyes to the movement of the Spirit among us we can see God at work, perhaps like a gentle breeze, or a flame in the darkness that can't be extinguished, giving warmth and light to us all. The arc is bending. Let's be part of it. Let's go tell it on the mountain that it's happening. Let's share the good news about it. Let's find a renewed sense of hope in it. Let's thank God for it.