

Sermon for 29.12.2019     Rev'd Jenny Simson

To put the gospel story in context. The wise men had just left Bethlehem and after being warned in a dream about the danger of Herod they returned home by another route from the one they came.

Then Joseph is told in a dream that Herod seeks to kill the child. So for the child's safety Joseph take Jesus and Mary to Egypt and stays there until things develop for the better.

Now Egypt and Israel were bound together by geography and history. As we know Egypt had been the place of bondage for the Hebrews and God made himself known as their redeemer when he delivered them from the bondage of the Pharaoh.

The commandments of the law were grounded on this deliverance, and the story of their redemption – that the lord brought them out of Egypt with a mighty hand – was then passed down from father to son, from generation to generation.

But Egypt was also a land of refuge for Israelites who were driven into exile or sought escape from danger at home. And there is quite a list of those who fled to Egypt to seek refuge – Jeroboam fled when under threat of Solomon, Uriah escaped to Egypt when threatened by Jehoiakim and Jeremiah himself was carried off into Egypt by those who wanted to save him from Babylonian vengeance.

Egypt was a place to hold out when under threat. And it was the case for Joseph and Mary. They fled to Egypt to keep the baby Jesus safe and it is while Joseph, Mary and the baby were there that Herod slaughtered the innocent baby boys up to two years old who lived in the area around Bethlehem in the hope of killing off the child who would be king.

In our church tradition we know these dear children as 'Holy Innocence' – the first martyrs of the church.

After Herod's death God led Joseph, via a dream, back to the land of Israel and there he settled in the district of Galilee at Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, he will be called a Nazorean.

This passage from Matthew today completes the nativity story that we hear during Advent and Christmas, from the annunciation, to Mary's pregnancy, to her betrothal to Joseph who was a son of David and who gave the child, by adoption, the same lineage, the birth in Bethlehem, the host of angels heralding his birth, the witness of the shepherds and the visitation by the kings to the fleeing to Egypt and the return to Israel where the boy was to grow into manhood.

This is the story in the gospels of Luke and Matthew- and we know with great joy that it heralds the birth of our Lord and Saviour. But we may well ask, how does it fit - what does it tell us about our way of life today in the here and now and in the coming year of 2020.

Well while I was down the coast these past two days, I prayed about this reading and the insight given, goes like this: From the beginning Jesus was sought after – the shepherds came to see the event that the angel told them about, the kings came following the star to see him and to pay homage.

Herod also sought him out but for a different reason – he was not led by an angel nor did he want to pay him homage – Herod sought him to kill him - to get rid of him out of his life.

And as we have heard today, when this happened Joseph and Mary in obedience to God fled with him to a safe place.

Throughout his public ministry people continued to seek Jesus - mostly to pay homage and give thanks for the holiness, healing and new life that he brought. Some, however, seek him to kill him, and destroy what he brings into the world.

When Jesus was threatened in his adulthood, he didn't flee to Egypt for his safety, instead he made his choice to stay, because he was obedient to his fathers will. "Not my will but yours" we remember him saying in Luke's gospel before his passion.

And through perseverance and dependence upon God, Jesus suffered the passion - the ridicule and the crucifixion and on the third day he was resurrected.

As Paul's letter to the Hebrews tells us this morning, *through death he destroyed the one who has the power over death, the devil, and freed those who had fear of death. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.*

So for us who, in our own lives as his followers, go through our own testing times, we are being helped by him through what he has shown us about perseverance and relationship with God that will ultimately like him result in our own resurrected life.

Now on this journey there will be testing times and we may be led to withdraw to a safe place – our own Egypt you might say – to be rejuvenated or just to be still while listening for the soft voice of God to lead us, for it will be his presence with us that will save us.

*It was not a messenger or angel but his presence that saved them,* as Isaiah writes in today's reading.

On this first Sunday after Christmas, when we may be feeling a little worn out and perhaps even a little low after a busy Christmas time, we can be assured that his presence is with each one of us in the Holy Spirit – more than an angel or even a special messenger.

Our part is to keep our eyes on him and persevere and trust to walk onwards in his ways.

*Let us pray.*

*We pray for you, Lord, to purify our hearts  
that they may become your dwelling-place.*

*Let us never fail to find room for you,  
but come and abide in us,  
that we also may abide in you,  
for at this time you were born into the world*

*to show us the way of perseverance and trust so that  
we too can know the way of resurrected life.  
In Christs name we pray. Amen*

The Lord be with you.