

## Out of Egypt

Matthew 2:13-23

Our scripture this morning is about both dreams and God's wonderful provisions. Are you a dreamer? Do you even remember your dreams? Do your dreams have meaning that effect your waking life? Do you know you can purchase books that can help you interpret your dreams? In Detroit there are people who play the lottery based on their dreams, and others make important decisions dictated by their dreams. Like his Old Testament namesake, Joseph, the husband of Mary and protector of Jesus was a dreamer. Our scripture follows the departure of the magi to their own country. It falls into three sections: an angel's command, a ruler's command, and again an angel's command. Each concludes with a quote from Hebrew Scripture.

In order for us to understand Matthew's words it is crucial to note two major facts: the Gospel of Matthew's intention is to explain that Jesus is the new Moses, the new and final lawgiver. Second, Matthew understood Jesus life and ministry as the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scripture he quoted; with less concerned with "how it happened" than with "what it meant." Matthew wrote to reveal God's guiding purposes. He wanted us to know that God's actions initiate all human activity; this includes the sending of the angels, the actions of Joseph and his family, and the decisions of Herod and other agents of political unrest. Matthew saw Jesus' life being like that of Moses and the escape to and from Egypt with its evocation of the exodus, showing us that Jesus was both the redeemed and the redeemer. Matthew wanted his community and us to understand that God was functioning in the earliest events of Jesus' life to signify fulfillment of the prophets' words and redemption, regardless of the world's activities to the contrary. **Susan Hedahl**

The Old Testament tells us that the people of Israel went down to Egypt because of a long famine and there they became slaves. The times were difficult and uncertain. Matthew wants us to know that God gave Joseph and his family protection in uncertain times. This has meaning for us as we all lived in the aftermath of the 2008 international economic meltdown, we can all agree that we are living in uncertain times. Not since the 1930s and the Great Depression have we seen such social and economic upheaval: massive layoffs and double digit unemployment, companies closed that we would have never dreamed would close, stock-market turmoil where many lost money that it had taken years to accumulate. Although the stock market seems to have recovered, many families continue to have hard times and have more uncertainty ahead.

In an article in *USA Today*, mental health experts said financial stress takes a toll on people and the family: "The struggling economy hurts many Americans' mental health: anxiety, depression, sleep problems, and money-rooted marital conflicts." The article quoted Joy Browne, a psychologist in New York with a radio network talk show, who said that she "heard from working class listeners who were beset by layoffs and hair-trigger tempers at home." Even upper-middle-class people took a hit to their well-being. "They expected to retire and *could* not," Browne said. "They're being asked to take care of their grandchildren's education. They have homes they cannot sell and they cannot travel." People are more agitated, anxious, and angry. Layoffs, job insecurity, college expenses, bills that cannot be paid: the article said sleep problems are soaring—"they lay awake at night and worry."

Although many have recovered, these continue to be uncertain times, but our text suggests that God provides protection in uncertain times. God demonstrates God's providential care in uncertain times. Joseph knew that Jesus was the promised Messiah, and that the magi had asked Herod's court where the "king of the Jews" was

to be born. No other parents in Bethlehem had the context for understanding the imminent danger.

Matthew was clear that God acted to protect the Messiah, God's Son, from the dangers of life in this world. Herod waited to hear from the magi, who had come from the East, following the star that announced the birth of the one born king of the Jews. He had instructed them that when they found the child, they should return and let him know, so that he could worship as well. In a dream, it was revealed to the magi that they should not go back to Herod but should return to their country by another route. When Herod realized that they had tricked him, he was angry, and in his jealous rage he gave orders that all the boys in Bethlehem and vicinity that were two years old and under were to be killed.

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, instructed Joseph that Herod was seeking to kill the child, and that they were to go to Egypt and stay there until receiving further instructions. Egypt, under Roman control, was outside of Herod's jurisdiction, and the child would be safe there. Herod went forth with his diabolical plan, and the weeping of mothers was heard throughout Bethlehem.

Let's examine the man. Herod the Great (who ruled 37-4 BCE) was an Idumean, not a Jew, and was appointed by the Romans. He had to fight for several years (40-37 BCE) to take control of his kingdom, so he never felt secure. He maintained a private security force and built fortresses at Jerusalem, Sebaste, Caesarea, Machaerus, the Herodium, Masada, and elsewhere so he would never be far from a defensible refuge. He killed descendants of the Hasmoneans so he would have no rival. When he suspected intrigue in his own family, he killed his wife Mariamne and one of his sons. Before he died he commanded that at his death political prisoners should be killed so that there would be mourning throughout the land. Scholars tell us there are no other records of the slaughter of the innocents at Bethlehem, it is nevertheless

consistent with what we know about Herod. We do not know how many children were killed, but Bethlehem was a small village, so the number may have been as many as twenty. The loss of the "innocents" was an overwhelming cruelty, but we see a more hopeful vision in the way that God protected the Messiah child, and we can pray for God to protect each of us in uncertain times.

The grief was so great that the women refused to be comforted. One commentator suggests that despite the weeping of mothers, the blessing and hope was that the Messiah escaped, and because the Messiah escaped, eventually the people would be comforted. In the Messiah's escape, everyone, even mothers who lost their sons, would be comforted.

Despite wanting to kill the child, it was Herod who died. Upon the death of Herod, the angel of the Lord appeared again, and Joseph was instructed to take the child home, because the one who wanted to take the child's life was dead. Joseph heard that Herod's son was reigning in place of Herod; but this son was even more cruel and brutal than his father; therefore, according to another dream, he withdrew to Galilee and lived in a town called Nazareth. Nazareth was a despised place. Old Testament prophets foretold that the Messiah was to be despised (Pss. 22:6-8, 13; 69:8; Isa. 49:7; 53:2-3, 8; Dan. 9:26). The point is that God protected the Messiah from hurt, harm, and danger, from even the most despicable people in the most despised places.

The text tells of God's protective care and power in uncertain times. As God protected the Messiah from the threat of death, so will God provide protection in our times of job loss, bad news, falling stock prices, and unprecedented social and economic uncertainty. God will protect us in uncertain times and hide us in secret places. The Messiah was looked after, provided for, and placed in an environment where he could be nurtured and grow (in Bethlehem, Egypt and Nazareth), even in

the midst of dangerous and violent circumstances. God will do the same for us.

**Frank A. Thomas**

Matthew calls for all who observe Jesus' birth to renew our hope. Even if there are no apparent reasons to believe in a provident God, the birth and infancy, life and preaching, death and resurrection of Jesus are signs enough. At Jesus' birth, violent forces sought his life, just as violent forces had sought the life of Moses. But both were also brought out of Egypt by God's might hand. The violent forces at his birth foreshadowed the violence that eventually led to his crucifixion. Nevertheless, he was delivered from Herod's murderous intent, just as the people of God were delivered from Pharaoh. Even more so, Jesus was eventually delivered from death itself. Matthew dared to see things as they were and still affirm that God is working, even in the worst that we can do. Let us declare the real joy of Christmas and this new year of 2017: nothing can defeat God's promise of Immanuel, God with us. Even when we cannot celebrate peace on earth, therefore, we can celebrate Immanuel, and hence the love of God and the promise of peace. **R. Alan Culpepper**

It is 2017 and I don't know your dreams or your fears. Whatever you are going through, whatever your Egypt experience, whatever your difficulties; God is with you and will carry you through. Thank God and trust God in 2017.

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