

Jeremiah 31:7-14
Psalm 84
Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a
MATTHEW 2:13-15,19-23

Jesus: Adopted Child, Refugee and Savior

What happened after Christmas?

Last Sunday we heard as the Gospel reading the magnificent and profound prologue to the Gospel of John, which reflects on the *meaning* of “The word became flesh and dwelt among us.” On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day we heard what is probably the most familiar passage in the entire Bible to many people, St. Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth at Bethlehem and his worship by the shepherds. Next week’s Gospel speaks of Jesus’ baptism at about the age of 30 and the beginning of his adult ministry as teacher, preacher, healer, disciple-maker – as Savior and Lord. But what happened between Jesus’ birth and his baptism thirty years later?

Pious Christians and sometimes not so pious other people have invented all kinds of tales about this period in Jesus’ life. Only two of the books of the New Testament, however, speak about it, the first two chapters of Matthew and the first two chapters of Luke. Both accounts of the prelude to Jesus’ birth and his childhood provide inspired (in every sense of the word) accounts with deep theological meaning, not just charming tales.

Luke’s picture of these years is filled with poetry – some of the best-loved canticles in the Christian liturgy, like the Song of Mary, come from his account – and, for the most part, serenity. According to Luke, Joseph and Mary start in Nazareth and have to journey to Bethlehem for the sake of governmental paperwork devised by a First Century Roman Department of Homeland Security – certainly inconvenient and uncomfortable (especially for someone near her due date), but not life-threatening. There are signs of stresses to come: a prophetess tells Mary in the Temple in Jerusalem that she will suffer emotional and spiritual anguish, which she certainly does at Jesus’ torture and execution. Luke also tells us that Joseph and Mary forgot to check in the back of their caravan upon leaving Jerusalem to return to Nazareth when Jesus was twelve, and eventually found him in the Temple. But for the most part, Luke’s account is dominated by a sense of serenity.

Matthew, on the other hand, packs in drama, suspense, mystery and danger into his description of this same period – all of which is filled with spiritual meaning for us, including today’s passage. In Matthew, Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant and “resolves to divorce her quietly” since he knows that he is not responsible for her pregnancy and since, if he divorces her publicly, she could be executed on charges of adultery. Drama and suspense? You bet. Only when an angel appears to him in a dream and tells Joseph that Mary’s pregnancy is a special act of Creation by God – *and that he is needed* to be Jesus’ *adoptive*, earthly father, does Joseph refrain from a course of action that could have ended the whole New Testament in what is now the first chapter of its first book.

And here is a crucial theme: Joseph was not Jesus' biological father, but God knows that parenting, *real* parenting, is about commitment and caring, not about biology. Jesus did not need a biological father, but God wanted him to have a *dad*: Joseph. At Jesus' briss – the ritual, religious circumcision ceremony on the eighth day of a Jewish boy's life, which we celebrate on January 1st as Holy Name Day – Joseph officially *named* Jesus, proclaiming legally and religiously that this was his son. At the time, only Joseph and Mary knew that this was a legal *adoption* by Joseph as a result of his decision to believe the heavenly messenger.

So, I think of Joseph the carpenter as the “patron saint of adoptive parents.” Adoptive parents, take a bow. Adopted children, you are in *very* good company: Jesus himself was legally adopted too.

Even more than that – let's look at today's Epistle, which makes the much broader point that “God destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ.” *Through baptism*, we are adopted as children of God. Our Sunday Eucharists, therefore, are *Sunday dinners with our family in Christ*.

Today's Gospel story comes right after the visit of the three wise men, a more familiar story which deserves its own sermon. I'll just say that these mysterious visitors add to the air of mystery and wonder in Matthew's account: the main point of that story was that foreigners – Gentiles, *goyim* – came to worship the new-born king of the Jews (and Savior of the world). The one who was actually sitting on a throne in Jerusalem – the notorious Herod – was none too pleased to hear this rumor of the birth of the Messiah, as last week's Christmas pageant script made clear.

King Herod combined some features of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Henry VIII and Joseph Stalin. Herod, like FDR, was very big on building infrastructure; like Henry VIII, he was not a safe person to be married to; like Stalin, he was not safe to be around, period. Herod had his wife and three of his sons executed because he suspected them of plotting against him and was ruthless with others as well. The three verses which are omitted from the middle of this morning's Gospel account – Herod's slaughter of all the boys in Bethlehem aged two and under – is not on record historically other than in Matthew's Gospel, but Herod was the kind of person who could have done such a thing in order to wipe out a threat to his rule.

Joseph and Mary were warned by God ahead of time, and fled to Egypt for safety, beyond the reach of Herod's power. There they stayed, according to Matthew, until Herod died – in what we call 4 B.C., so our calendar is a bit off, as Jesus must have been born in 6 or 7 B.C.

So, as a toddler, *Jesus was a refugee*.

This was all the more poignant because, according to Matthew, Bethlehem was not only Jesus' birthplace but also Joseph and Mary's home – to which they never returned, preferring the relative safety of Nazareth in Galilee to a Judea ruled by Herod's most brutal son after Herod's death.

Jesus was a refugee. Think of the TV news pictures you've seen of refugees. They are hard to look at. *We must look* and see in the face of “the least of these who are

members of Christ's family" the face of Christ himself in a little child fleeing for his life from a murderous ruler.

And yes, we also have refugees *in our congregation*. They fled from murderous authorities, not to Egypt like Jesus, but to *America*. We are the safe haven, the place of refuge, the place of peace. In this century, Jesus' fellow refugees come here. If they are allowed in. From Sierra Leone, from Cuba, from Hungary, from Russia – just to name a few of the homelands of former refugees we have among us in this church – they came. And still people come, and seek to come, for political asylum as it is now called.

Refugees and former refugees, you are in very, very good company. Jesus was a refugee.

Jesus retraced the route of his people, the Jewish people. Joseph, like his namesake the patriarch Joseph in Genesis, brought his family to safety in Egypt. Jesus, like the infant Moses, had his life threatened by a murderous King, but both had their lives spared providentially. Both had to flee – Moses as a young adult – but both were brought back to their people to lead them to freedom. Jesus' return from Egypt also echoes the other great deliverance in ancient Israel's history: the return from the Exile in the late 6th Century B.C.

The Son of God, though King of the Universe, was born in humble circumstances to the care of a solid, working class couple living under the occupation of a foreign power. That is widely recognized by Christians. So people of modest financial and social standing, and people whose homelands are not independent and self-governing, know that Jesus Christ understands all that very well because he lived it. There are no second class professions and no second class homelands to Christ. Power and prestige in earthly terms are minute compared with what Christ brought to any station in life he occupied.

And today we recognize and celebrate Jesus' legal adoption by Joseph – so adopted children also are not second class. And we recognize and celebrate Jesus' experience as a homeless refugee – so refugees and the homeless, also, are not second class.

Even in the first two years of his life, Jesus turned worldly notions of status and prestige upside down. Wherever he sat was "the head of the table" – but, he would tell us, he came not to be served, but to serve.

Let us start this new year with extra compassion, prayer and outreach for those who are refugees – here or in other countries – for those who are homeless, and for those who yearn to be adopted. And let us not be vain about whatever worldly status or possessions we have, for your own only truly lasting status is as the adopted children of Almighty God, and our only permanent home is in the Kingdom of God; all other status and possessions and homes are transitory.

So let us, in the words of the Letter to the Ephesians, "Know what is the hope to which God has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe."

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