

Christmas II Year C

You know there is something about a journey. A journey is full of mystery.... Whenever we travel I start thinking this way. When one embarks on a journey the adrenaline spikes... One must be extra sensory... One must prepare, make allowances, forbear the folly of one's travelling companions; rely on the kindness of strangers... most of all... one must pay attention.... And there are always surprises along the way... The journey is never what one thought it would be. The so-called plans for travel must always be amended, improvised.... The journey, like life itself, is provisional, contingent to that over which we have no control.... full of possibility... and dangerous..... It is no wonder that the journey is a prominent literary device used by writers over the centuries.... The journey, a metaphor for our lives.

Matthew's gospel is no exception.... We enter the story of the "Good News" with the family of Jesus on a journey... They have travelled to Bethlehem from Nazareth to get documented by the registrars of the occupying government... and little did we know when reading about Jesus' birth in the stilled bucolic Judean countryside among shepherds and angels that the dark forces of power were already conspiring to do the child in.... Herod, the Half/Jewish overlord, set up into power by the Romans, we are told, is threatened by this new leader of Israel of whom the prophets had spoken.... And then the family we are told is forced to flee to Egypt to evade Herod's murderous intentions... They are told in a dream to flee for their lives.... And then to return when the coast is clear.... And Matthew tells us that this journey is to fulfill the scripture.... That, according to ancient prophecy... "out of Egypt God calls God's Son."

Now, none of this is historical of course... There is no historical evidence that Herod slaughtered infant males in Judea... no record of the Holy Family living in Egypt for a time.... This is not history Matthew is giving us... This is theology... This is a magnificent story, a story about an improbable journey that lets us in on Matthew's understanding of the meaning of the birth, and life, and ministry of this Jesus of Nazareth who, along with the movement he engendered, changed the world ... which is historical.

So here's what we know historically: According to the Jewish historian Josephus living in Alexandria in the first century... That a man named Jesus, a roaming preacher and teacher in the Wisdom tradition... preached and taught in Galilee, mostly... and eventually was crucified in Jerusalem by the Roman authorities for being an enemy of the state... That's it.... In fact Josephus gives much more press to the figure of John the Baptist. Countless historians over the centuries have searched for more historical data concerning Jesus, but all have only come up with the same things as Josephus.... Preacher teacher in Galilee; killed by the Romans for sedition... What Josephus could not see.... And what we now know, is that the figure of Jesus, his life and ministry, and the people who have carried his vision of the collaboration between God and humankind... has changed the world... and still that vision has traction... still that vision speaks of the present possibility of mercy and justice and non-violence.... And love of neighbor.

In our popular understanding of salvation history, we are taught that this birth... this birth of the Christ child, the Son of God... and his crucifixion and resurrection... are all sufficient... that the world is set right once and for all... "just believe", we are told... but that is hollow and too easy, self-edifying and unsatisfying.... Is it not? Matthew speaks of this birth as an improbable event on a journey fraught with uncertainty and doubt.... A fragile, shall we say unorthodox birth, against a backdrop of darkness and fear and conspiratorial violence. Matthew is painting a picture of the way the world is... darkness and light.

This birth is the possibility of love and light in the midst of fear and dispossession... and that: the possibility of love and light in the midst of fear and dispossession is what this journey of life is all about.... In the passage that follows the one we just read in Matthew... the writer tells us that out of Egypt God calls his Son.... Matthew has Jesus coming back to Galilee from Egypt because any Jewish audience of his day would recognize the Exodus motif... the escape from slavery in Egypt by the hand of God for the people of Israel.... This birth is a new Exodus. Matthew is making the theological point that what this vision of the Christ, God's anointed, God's Son... what this vision is all about ultimately... is freedom, the ongoing process of freedom... The vision of the Christ, is that on this journey through the valley of the shadow of death... on this provisional and seemingly random journey challenged by the darkness of the world and the fear that the darkness engenders... We are offered freedom... freedom to live into our

full humanity... freedom to live as imaginative souls... Freedom to choose love... Our free will, brothers and sisters, I'll say again... is not a curse... It is a gift.... Human free will is not our undoing... It is the gift of the infinite possibility to love.

And if the Christian vision has any relevancy left, given the church's complicity to self-interest and control... If the Christian vision has any relevancy left... and I believe it does... then it is now time for us to reclaim it.... This vision has always at its heart been about solidarity with our brothers and sisters who journey with us.... And most especially the ones who lack true freedom the most. The freedom we are given at this life changing birth we must give away. We must make sure that everyone who walks life's way... does so with their full humanity, with dignity, and choice, and well-being.... Freedom in short... set free from the ties that bind... set free from the fear that infects our world.... Set free to improvise God's life of love in their own lives, and in the lives they love.

So we 21st century Christians when it comes to matters of freedom, we have a say... and we dare not keep silent.... We are called to freedom, freedom for God's people... Who are God's people?... You see them in the news every day... they are refugees from violence... they are victims of warfare.... Victims of racial scapegoating... victims of poverty, and lack of opportunity... victims of the ties that bind people up and smother people's humanity... So injustice, and racism, and the disparity of wealth, and abuse in a for-profit prison system... and inaccess to health care in a for-profit healthcare delivery system.... the corporate profit imperative for war, that Eisenhower named the military industrial complex.... All these things and more matter to us as Christian people, because all of these things bind us on our journey... and we.... We are called for freedom.

I don't believe God has a plan as such. I believe it is only the journey, still becoming in improvised mystery... the journey that God calls good.... The long and winding road full of potential and possibility.... God's plan, as it were, is for us to bring love to the journey.... And the good news is that we, none of us, journey alone... The good news is that we are in the journey together, looking out for each other, having each other's back. We journey as best we can, paying rapt attention, bringing Love that engenders freedom for God's people... freedom to be who God created us all to be... despite any best laid plans.