

## Christmas II Year C 2025

There is nothing quite like a journey. Despite our best laid plans, our GPS, our travel app, a journey is full of mystery.... Whenever we travel our souls quicken... our adrenaline spikes.... One's senses must of necessity be heightened... One must prepare, make allowances, forbear the folly of one's travelling companions; rely on the kindness of strangers... and most of all... one must pay attention.... And there, of course, are always surprises along the way... The journey is never what one thought it would be. And we are always changed in some way... The so-called plans for travel must always be amended on short notice, 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 millennia...The journey is the quintessential 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 despite the stilled, bucolic Judean countryside among shepherds and angels, and Gloria in Excelsis, the dark forces of power were already conspiring to do the child in.... Herod, the overlord, set up into power by the Romans, we are told, is threatened by this purported 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.... They are refugees, in short... And Matthew tells us that this journey is to fulfill the scripture.... That, according to ancient prophecy... “Out of Egypt God called God’s Son.” But there are two journeys here.... the Holy family, come from Nazareth to Judea... and then there are the so-called “wise men” come from the east. The wise men, or, in the Greek, the magi, are alchemists. The translation is unfortunate. These are savant mystics whose vocation throughout antiquity was to search for the divine life in earth... the metaphor being... turning mundane elements into gold. So here we have a confluence of the mundane with the divine... a poor family whom the heavens have anointed to bear the divine to the world.... The divine not in the heavens, but in a stable.

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 improbable journeys 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... There was a man named Jesus, an itinerant preacher and teacher in the Wisdom tradition. He had a modest following... he 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 historical facts 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 collaborative relationship between God and humankind... has changed the world... and still , we believe, that vision has traction... still that vision speaks of the present possibility of mercy and justice and non-violence.... And love of neighbor in a world brutalized still by the patriarchal power of empire.

In the 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 was set right once and for all... "Just believe", we are told... but that is hollow, and sentimental, and so very easy, and self-edifying... but so very unsatisfying.... 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: a world of beauty and abundance beset by oppressive power. We dare not sentimentalize the story, lest we lose sight of the fact that this is rhetoric; and rhetoric is written in order to persuade the hearer to do something.

This birth represents the possibility of love and light in the midst of fear and oppression... and moreover, that the possibility of love and light in the midst of fear and oppression is what this journey of life is all about... 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 is typology...This birth is a new Exodus; history come round again... 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, and courage, the ongoing process of freedom that is founded on courage. There is no freedom without courage... 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 did not bring about a so-called fall from Grace... It is a gift.... Human free will is not our undoing... It is the gift of the infinite possibilities to love.

And if the Christian vision has any relevancy left, given the church's complicity to self-interest and its indifference to matters of the public good... then it is now time, once again, for us to reclaim it.... This vision has always at its heart been about solidarity with our brothers and sisters who are fleeing for their life.... the ones who lack true freedom the

most. We must make sure that everyone who walks life's way... does so with their full humanity, with dignity, and choice, and agency, 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 serve. We are to bind up broken hearts with God's freedom... Salvation is about the exodus of our neighbor from oppression and fear, from isolation, from despair. Salvation is not a personal matter. It is about the freedom, the exodus of the community to which we are given. Matthew will return to this theme at the end of his Gospel, when he once again describes the ones for whom we are given, the ones fleeing for their lives: "when did you see me hungry and give me something to eat; when did you visit me in prison; when did you welcome me, a stranger; when was I sick and you visited me."

So we 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians when it comes to matters of freedom, we have a say... and we dare not keep silent.... Our faith is a public faith. Our faith belongs to the world... We, good people, are called to freedom, freedom for God's people... And who are God's people? You see them in the news every day. You see them walking on Government Street... they are refugees from violence detained at our border... they are victims of warfare, and drone attacks.... They are victims of racial scapegoating... they are victims of poverty, and lack of opportunity... 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 make life so unbearable for so many... And it matters because we are God's people.... And as far as we know, according to the ancient scribes of our tradition, God, since the beginning, has been about setting the captives free.... And as God's people, that makes us advocates. That makes us activists. That makes us organizers. That makes us revolutionaries. It is among the world's faithful where the divine comes to earth.

Maybe it's because I am now a senior citizen, alas.... But I don't believe God has planned our journeys. I don't believe God has an end in mind. I believe it is only the journey to which God gives God's life;... and it takes courage to travel good people... Our journey is improvised according to Love's imagination... 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... And we don't Love alone. Love is collaborative. 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. Forget the destination. The journey is the thing... We as the baptized are called to be noble travelers. That means that Love and Love alone is our guide on this marvelous way .... And that the journey *is* the destination in the making.