

We have just celebrated Christmas; some of us enjoyed Christmas Eve filled with songs like "holy infant, so tender and mild" and that "little town of Bethlehem" that sheltered the tender, mild, holy infant. Some of us heard Luke's depiction of a young mother giving birth to her firstborn child and angels greeting shepherds with words of peace on earth and good will to all. It was, I'm sure, a beautiful and hope-filled evening and celebration. Which is what makes the transition to this harrowing reading from Matthew so jarring, way too soon for such horrific tales. Had I been putting together the lectionary, I would have tarried a bit longer at the nativity. Given that this is the year of Matthew, I would at least have inserted the first part of the story we read today, the part we know so well, of the magi making their way to Jerusalem to present their gifts to the us the chance to sing "We Three Kings" to boot. But not so. Instead, we skip the more familiar and enjoyable part of story to get to the scenes we would rather forget: the flight to Egypt and slaughter of the innocents. In some ways, when I come upon this passage – even though I know it's coming! – I feel just a little cheated, that Christmas has been abruptly shortened and that we have been shortchanged. Baby Jesus and the Holy Family survive, thanks to the intervention of angels, dreams, and Joseph's obedience to their direction, but at what cost? All the children 2 years old and under in and around Bethlehem are murdered. The birth of the One who comes to save, ushers in a wave of death at the hands of Herod.

We have gone from a vision of beauty to a complete and utter nightmare. Joseph awakes with a start, knowing they must flee for their lives. Herod's plans to kill the children in an attempt to kill the threat to his power is now revealed to Joseph. There

is a frenzy of activity, stuffing together whatever they can carry, walking down the street trying to look as inconspicuous as possible, trying to get out of town as fast as possible, child crying, mother exhausted, Joseph's heart clutching in his throat every time he sees a soldier. The family is plagued with questions, "Will we be seen, Will we be heard, Will we get out in time?" They head off to the African country of Egypt, to the safety and anonymity of the same country that several hundred years before had been a source of pain for their ancestors. There in the middle of the night, the people of Israel had fled to get away from the horrors of a Pharaoh who had killed many Hebrew male children and would do it again in the blink of an eye. Egypt, a country of melanin-kissed people, would not only be the source of civilization, but it would protect the Savior from Herod's horrific actions. In such a move, Matthew wants us to see that both Herod and Pharaoh are causes of great suffering for the innocent and vulnerable ones.

The refugee Joseph receives a second dream – Herod the tyrant is dead; it is safe to return home. After dealing with a strange language, different food and customs, and the ambiguous state of being refugees, if not illegal immigrants, they can go back to what had become only more precious the longer they were gone. No sooner do they arrive in Judea than the old nightmare returns as Herod's son takes over and resumes his father's cruelty. A third dream confirms Joseph's apprehensions and they must go further north. There will be no homecoming after all. No return to the old neighborhood.

It is a jarring story for the Sunday after Christmas filled with more questions than answers. It is a premonition of the last 3 years of this child's life to come. Questions which I want to honor in this space by inviting your perspective, your thoughts on this story. For we are now in the year where we will be studying the Gospel of Matthew and

Matthew is all about the people of faith, the Jewish influence upon this Child and the fulfillment of God's promises to God's people. It is, therefore, appropriate to discuss a bit on this story. What questions do you have? Is God portrayed as good or bad, just or unjust in this story? (At what costs is Jesus saved?) The night is still dark in our world and a procession of Herods still terrorize the earth, killing the children to stay in power – the world still knows its Herods. Who are the slaughtered innocents, the vulnerable and oppressed under the boot of the powerful? Who are the Rachels of our world grieving unspeakable loss today? How do we perceive, listen to dreams, nudgings of God's? The next ones are more for introspection – God speaks not just through angels and dreams, but also through others, through Scripture, through creation. Are we willing to act on divine interactions when we perceive them? When have we been complicit with the Herods of today? How do we stand with Jesus' parents and the wise men, joining forces to protect the most vulnerable?

North Carolina novelist David Joy wrote a powerful essay titled, "Digging in the Trash." He writes about people dubbed "trailer trash" and others struggling mightily to survive. He says, "I recognized some folks had more than others, that I had a little more than them, and the rest of the world had a lot more than any of us. I recognized class. It's just that I don't remember ever equating class to a person's worth, and count myself lucky for that." He then shares what one reviewer wrote about novel, "Where All Light Tends to Go." The reviewer told the author he should leave the peeling trailers, come down out of the hollers, and try writing about people for a change." He actually indicated that those who lived in those trailers, who find themselves in a world consumed by addictions, hopelessness, and violence...they are not people at all. The

list is lengthy of those who are treated the same, those whose perceived worth on earth is not what it is in heaven. But the story of the poor refugee family, of children deemed expendable, of innocents slaughtered stands at the end of the Christmas story to remind us of a different reality. The oppressed and afflicted are shown that the God whose Son was crucified does not turn aside from the depth of their pain, but willingly enters into our world of suffering and ensures that resurrection will have the final word. This story reminds us that even the most horrific of journeys are not God-forsaken and perhaps may even serve God's purposes, may even provide hope, no matter if those listening are fleeing to Egypt, in the middle of the wilderness, or finally headed safely home.