

## **The First Sunday of Christmas - Matthew 2:13-23**

Since Christmas Day has just passed, I have an obligation to remind you of what you already know: "Christmas is not just one day of the year! It is a whole season. There are twelve wonderful days of Christmas!"

It's my job as a preacher to say that; but, now, here's a confession. I don't care how many times I countdown that holiday song...you know the one...the twelve days of Christmas... though I know it is still Christmas...in a way...it feels like Christmas already is over.

For good or bad, you may have already sent the shepherds back to the attic, back to their Styrofoam fields to keep watch over their china crèche flock by night. You may be ready to move on because it feels like Christmas should be over.

This is uncomfortable for a pastor to admit. But confession is supposed to be good for the soul. Also, it may be...it may be...a doorway into the Gospel lesson. Because I suppose, I suspect, that the Holy Family was ready for life to "get back to normal" as well.

You know the story's preface. There's an awkward pregnancy along with a "pre-due date" relocation because of taxation. Then a birth to this blended family, followed by a hosting of a holiday party, including Luke's shepherds and Matthew's Wise Men.

My hunch is the holy family had probably seen enough of Christmas. They must have been ready for things to return to normal--whatever that is. But, alas, they would never see normal again. This baby had brought with him a new normal.

Covid has brought a new vernacular into our vocabulary. We live in a "new normal." Now that Covid has happened this is the new normal. Things will never be the same.

This phrase is often used these days to describe the anxious malaise that lingers around the economic uncertainty with its bitter residue of a latent fear. And it is so personal. There's the neighbor who was going to retire, but can't. The friend who was

let go when the company downsized. Church budgets have shrunk and staff have been laid-off or churches have closed altogether. The family down the street wonders where their next meal will come from.

**Come to think of it, all "new normals" first feel like grief. Even the Christmas story is seasoned with grief.** And maybe it is important to name that first and up-front!

We may prefer a different topic today...a different text on the eighth day of Christmas. But the terrain of life changes quickly. *Glory to God in the highest* can dive to a low point in less than a human heartbeat.

Even the Holy Family was not given the luxury of *sleeping in heavenly peace* for very long. The flutter of angels' wings in Joseph's dreams warned of an evil tyrant on the loose going door-to-door looking for babies to kill. *So flee!*

On the one hand, there's *the little Lord Jesus no crying he makes...*but on the other hand, there is Rachel, close by, weeping for her children.

If joy has felt illusive for you this holiday season, you are in good company with Mary and Joseph and Jesus...and God.

This tragic story that precipitates the Holy Family's flight to Egypt is burned in the church's memory as "The Slaughter of the Holy Innocents." You will be hard-pressed to find it in the history books. Does it matter? Perhaps its purpose is to say that the Jesus story is even bigger than we know. It echoes all of God's Big Story.

Matthew seems to go out of his way to highlight this. Like Moses, the baby Jesus is almost killed by a malicious ruler. Like Moses, Egypt becomes a place of exile, but also safety. Like Moses, the "delivered one" becomes the deliverer; and God's power to save is greater than evil's power to destroy.

With any "new normal"---from prolonged family crises to financial fears to a haunting sense of uncertainty--grief is a real reality even during Christmas.

**But there's a second thing: these tough times call up one of the consistent punch lines of scripture: *that wherever we find ourselves, we are never off God's map. God has been there before!*** Even in the land of the loss, even in far away Egypt, even in the "new normal," it is not new to God. God has been there before.

Fascinating, isn't it...that right off the bat, God's own Son becomes a transient, homeless, migrant, alien. Within a few pages the baby will be all grown-up and we'll hear him say, "Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." I guess once a refugee, still a refugee.

One of Matthew's favorite words for God's back-stage providential work is *fulfill*. "And they remained in Egypt in order to *fulfill* what had been spoken by the Lord...." "Then it was *fulfilled* what Jeremiah said...." "And they settled in Nazareth so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be *fulfilled*."

As Matthew tells Jesus' story, he embroiders it into the fabric of God's Big Story--a story that has been a long time in the making.

Wherever we go, whatever we feel, faithful people have found that God faithfully has been there, done that, and will meet us there, as well, again.

So, here we sit, with a new year just ahead, an old year with bittersweet memories almost behind; and in our hearts we hold a Christmas story. A bizarre Christmas story--with foreign tyrants and heavy taxes and bloody swords and innocent suffering and homeless holy refugees.

And, remarkably, prayerfully, God somehow uses this collage of odd images to *fulfill* a commitment to us. It can be stated so simply, it almost is embarrassing to say; but here it is: *With our grief in one hand, and our gratitude in the other, we bask in God's big promise to never leave us or forsake us.*

Whatever next year's "new normal" brings our way--the good news is it is not new to God. And that is a Christmas gift worth keeping. Amen.