

**DREAMS OF CHRISTMAS:
(3) DREAMS OF SAFETY IN EGYPT**

Matthew 2:13

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SCRIPTURE

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." {14} Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, {15} and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." {16} When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. {17} Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: {18} "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more" (Matthew 2:13-18 NRSV).

MESSAGE

The holidays--Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's - it's the busiest travel season of the year. In the next couple of days, if you haven't already heard it, "I'll Be Home for Christmas" is going to be played on the radio, over and over and over. The Gospel accounts of the birth and early childhood of Jesus are busy with travel too. There's Mary's trip to visit her cousin Elizabeth, then the journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. The Magi travel hundreds of miles from Persia to find the Christ Child and worship him. Then, in today's Scripture reading, the Family are once again on the road, this time traveling to Egypt to escape the murderous plan of Herod to kill Jesus. In a few months, they'll be traveling back to Bethlehem, and from Bethlehem on to Nazareth, where Jesus will grow up. That's a lot of frequent donkey miles, or camel miles, or whatever.

Interestingly, each of these journeys begins with a dream. Herod had his spies and informers, but Joseph had dreams, and Scripture to confirm them. But his dreams weren't necessarily the happy kind. The one we consider today was a nightmare.

There had been happy moments, to be sure. Holding baby Jesus on the day of his birth was one. The welcome given the child by the shepherds was another. And, of course, there was the visit of the Magi who bowed in worship and presented their gifts.

And there were the ceremonies--the circumcision and naming of Jesus. If family members

were nearby, there'd have been a party. The purification of Mary and the redemption of Jesus in the temple were happy moments made even more happy by the joyful songs of Anna and Simeon. So, not all was gloom and suffering in those early days.

But they ended all too quickly with Herod's threat against the life of Jesus, revealed to Joseph in a dream. Though settled into their home in Bethlehem, perhaps intending to spend their lives there, the Family was forced to flee in the middle of the night to Egypt to escape the sword of Herod. We like to think of Mary riding a donkey, cradling Jesus in her arms on the perilous journey as Joseph leads the way. But a donkey isn't mentioned. Luke tells us that when Jesus was redeemed at the temple--the firstborn male in every family belonged to God, so if you wanted to keep him, so to speak, you had to buy him back--Mary and Joseph offered a couple of pigeons. That was the price poor people paid; a perfect lamb was required of everyone else. If they couldn't afford a lamb, it is unlikely they could have afforded a donkey.

It was two hundred miles to Egypt, twice as far as from Nazareth to Bethlehem. At 20 or so miles a day, it would have taken at least ten or twelve days to get there. In our day it can be hard for a young couple to pack the diaper bag with baby things, load the minivan and drive across town for a two-hour activity. Imagine what it must have been like walking two hundred miles with a toddler, carrying on your back all you owned, sleeping out in the open every night for nearly two weeks, worrying about thieves and wild animals.

Meanwhile, King Herod is slaughtering the male babies in your hometown, two years of age and under, and maybe sending troops after your child. Did Mary personally know the mothers and the names of the babies that died? Maybe they chatted together as they drew water, washed clothes or bought food from the merchants. How did Mary feel about her child being spared while the others were not?

We're horrified by this story. Some people think it's so brutal it must be fiction. But even apart from this account, it was thoroughly consistent with what's known of Herod's character, at least in his later years.

Early in his reign, he wasn't such a bad king. He'd built aqueducts, public buildings, roads, new cities and the port of Caesarea, greatly enhancing the prosperity of Palestine. He endeared himself to many by rebuilding and beautifying the temple in Jerusalem. For all these reasons he's called "Herod the Great." But he had ten wives and many sons, and all these sons and relatives were busy trying to secure Herod's throne for themselves.

So Herod, increasingly paranoid, murdered one after another. He lived in constant suspicion, afraid of being poisoned. There's an old saying, "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not really after you." In this case they were.

As he got older, the population yearned for the day he would die. From his deathbed, he

was so concerned that no one would grieve his passing, he ordered several of the most prominent citizens of his realm taken to the Hippodrome and executed. That way there'd be weeping on the day he died. Fortunately, the order was not carried out. So yes, Herod was more than capable of killing little children.

We've all seen enough television news coverage of mass murders to get an idea of what the scene in Bethlehem must have been like. Shouting soldiers, shrieking mothers, helpless fathers, and terrorized children hiding wherever they can. Matthew quotes a verse from Jeremiah to describe how it must have been, "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." It's as though Rachel, the beloved wife of Jacob, even though she had died long ago giving birth to Benjamin, grieves for her grandchildren who are now dying in Bethlehem.

But miraculously, through a dream Joseph is warned by an angel: "Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you." So in the middle of the night, Joseph hurriedly rouses his wife and the child Jesus. Hastily they grab a few necessities for the journey; jars of water, some bread, perhaps some tools and some basic cooking utensils, maybe a blanket. Mary leads Jesus by the hand or perhaps carries him if he's too small to hurry. Together they half-run, half-walk through the dark and silent streets on their way out of town.

What route did they take to Egypt? There was a caravan route along the Mediterranean coast. That was the fastest and easiest way, if walking 200 miles can be easy. But that would also be the fastest and easiest way for Herod's soldiers to find them. The other way was south through the isolation and danger of the Sinai desert, maybe to the very area the children of Israel had wandered after their escape from Egypt. Which would you choose if you were Joseph, charged with protecting the infant Messiah? Both were extremely dangerous, though for different reasons. I favor the idea of the desert journey because it offers a parallel to the experience of Israel in the wilderness. And Jesus represents Israel. In Jesus, Israel has a second chance to get it right, as all of us do, through faith in him.

Whichever route it was, how far could you travel in the darkness before stopping to rest if you thought soldiers were coming to kill your child? Five miles? Ten? We can assume the Family traveled till Mary and the child dropped from exhaustion, maybe hiding behind rocks and bushes. Meanwhile, Joseph would anxiously scan the horizon and listen intently for any sign of being followed. Surely, he and Mary had no real rest till they were across the border in Egypt, where Herod's jurisdiction couldn't reach them.

What does the Family do in Egypt? Where do they live? How long are they there? Again, we really don't know the answers to these questions. Perhaps they made their way to Alexandria, where there was a large Jewish population said to be greater than in Jerusalem. Or, more likely, they traveled to the vicinity of Cairo. In Old Cairo, there's the

Church of St. Sergius built over a cave where the Family is supposed to have lived for three months. Perhaps Joseph hired himself out as a day laborer, or maybe if he had his tools he did carpentry work to earn money for food and rent. Wherever they lived, they were only in Egypt till Herod died, maybe only a few months, just long enough for the threat to pass.

We are tempted to get sentimental about the story of the flight into Egypt even as we sentimentalize the story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. Hearing the nativity stories in Matthew and Luke reminds us of our own childhood and family traditions. Maybe we think about tough times we had growing up or as a young married couple. It is hard to separate the emotional from the theological. But Matthew does not include the story of the escape to Egypt for sentimental reasons. He has a message to tell.

There is a clear similarity here between the stories of baby Moses and baby Jesus. Matthew is trying to show us how much Jesus is like Moses, but far superior. Moses as a baby barely escapes death at the hands of an evil king; so does baby Jesus. Moses would grow up to lead the people out of Egypt, saving them from slavery and giving them the Law. So, too, Jesus would come out of Egypt to save his people from the slavery of sin and give them the Gospel. Moses took the people to the edge of the Promised Land of Canaan; Jesus, through his death and resurrection, brings his people to the Promised Land of heaven.

In Jesus, all of us escape death as we flee with him to Egypt. In Jesus, all of us are rescued from slavery to sin as we come out of Egypt with him. In Jesus, all of us are delivered from the Law that condemns us through the cross of Christ that saves us. That's what this is about--salvation. As you hear and believe the story of Jesus' birth and his suffering, first as a child and then as a man, God saves you.

Yes, there is nostalgia in the story. We're human and that touches us. But Joseph's visions in the night were not visions of "sugar plums" dancing in his head. Thank God they weren't. They were dreams of warning that he heeded, so that you and I would have a Savior.

If there were no story, if there were no birth of Christ, no suffering of the infant Savior, no flight to Egypt, no return to Israel and no death of Jesus on the cross, we would be without hope. But these things did happen. The Son of God was born as a real human being like us. And in our place, even in his childhood, threatened by Herod and fleeing in the night, he began a life of suffering that would be completed only when he died on the cross to set us free from sin and death.