

**DREAMS OF CHRISTMAS:  
(4) DREAMS OF A RETURN TO ISRAEL**

Matthew 2:19-20

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**SCRIPTURE**

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, {20} "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead" (Matthew 2:19-20 NRSV).

**MESSAGE**

Dreams and visions at Christmas seem to go together. Bing Crosby sings, "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas." Clement Moore tells us "The children were nestled all snug in their beds, while visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads." And Ebenezer Scrooge is not sure if he is experiencing dreams or visions in Charles Dickens', "A Christmas Carol."

There's quite a tradition of dreams and visions at Christmas. It's an old tradition; as old as Christmas itself. Christmas began with the dreams and visions of Joseph, Mary, shepherds and Wise Men. That is what we have been considering each week of this Advent season, especially the dreams of Joseph and the Wise Men. They tend to get overlooked because the focus is usually on the shepherds, the innkeeper and the manger in Luke's Gospel.

As a matter of fact, Matthew does not mention these at all. His focus is not so much on the birth as on the protection of Jesus after he was born. One after another come the dreams in Matthew's Gospel, five altogether. First is Joseph's dream of an angel who tells him to take Mary home as his wife. The child she carries is conceived by the Holy Spirit. He is the very Son of God who will save his people from their sins. Joseph obeys God's word through the angel, and so baby Jesus is born into the safety of Joseph's home, and thus into the house and line of David.

Next is the dream of the Magi or Wise Men. They follow a star all the way from Persia to Jerusalem looking for the newborn king. They visit King Herod thinking he might know where to find baby Jesus. Herod consults his priests and tells the Wise Men they will find the new king in Bethlehem. "As soon as you find him, report to me so that I, too, may go and worship him," he tells the Wise Men.

That's exactly what they intend to do. But instead they dream of an angel who warns them not to go back to Herod. They go home another way, gaining just enough time to allow the Family to escape from Herod who is already plotting to kill Jesus. So again a dream is heeded, and the Holy Infant's life is spared.

Perhaps on the same night the Wise Men have their dream, Joseph has another one. "Get up," the angel tells him in the dream, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." What follows is the story of the terrifying flight into Egypt in the predawn darkness. Meanwhile, the babies in Bethlehem are killed by Herod's soldiers.

Today we consider the fourth dream. A few months have gone by; we don't know exactly how many. According to tradition, the Family is living in a cave near Cairo. This seems to be a pattern; first they live in a house in Nazareth, then a cave in Bethlehem, then a house, and now once again a cave. So you see, it wasn't just as an adult that Jesus could say, "The Son of Man has no place to lay his head." Again and again Jesus is homeless, his life threatened, even as a baby.

It is probably at this second cave, a cave in Egypt, that the angel comes in a dream to Joseph. "Get up," the angel tells him, "take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead." How do you suppose Joseph feels as he hears these words? Initially, he's probably frightened. That's the usual response to a visit by an angel. Then perhaps he's relieved. At last, no one is trying to kill the child he's responsible to care for. But I suspect Joseph is soon overwhelmed with a sense of weariness as he contemplates yet another 200-mile walk with his family back to Bethlehem.

As they embark on their journey, we like to think of Mary cradling baby Jesus in her arms while she sits astride a donkey that Joseph leads. But this was a poor family. There may have been no donkey. It was probably just sandals and tired feet treading the ground a million times that carried the Family along the coastal highway to Gaza and then uphill to Joseph's hometown of Bethlehem. It would have been a long and difficult journey for a strong, healthy carpenter. Imagine what it must have been like traveling that far on foot, carrying all you owned on your back, coaxing and encouraging your family to keep moving, maybe carrying them some too.

Why all this torturesome travel; Nazareth to Bethlehem, Bethlehem to Egypt, Egypt to near Bethlehem, and then back to Nazareth, 600 miles or more? There are so many reasons, all of them important. The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem meant that Jesus would be born in the birthplace of King David into the family of David. The journey from Bethlehem to Egypt was to save Jesus from a murdering king. The journey from Egypt back to Israel was to allow Jesus to grow up in Nazareth to fulfill the promise that the Christ would be a Nazarene. These are the obvious reasons.

But there's another reason, an important one. The infancy and life of Jesus retrace the journeys of Israel, the people of God. Israel, the chosen people, the people God called to be his own, had disappointed him. But God loved them nonetheless. Centuries before when Israel was in danger of starvation in Palestine, they had been invited to Egypt to live

in safety under their relative Joseph.

But the safety of Egypt eventually turned into slavery. Years of misery passed. Hearing the cries of his people, God graciously provided Moses to lead Israel from slavery to freedom. You would think they would be thankful, but the whole time Moses led the people they kept complaining and murmuring against God.

Some people are like that — always complaining no matter what. A middle-aged man, famous for constant complaining and a nuisance to everyone who knew him, inherited a lot of money. After observing that it wasn't as much as he thought it should be, he told his wife, a gentle sweet-spirited woman, that he thought he would buy some acreage for them to enjoy in their retirement. "What do you think I should name my spread?" he asked, and she replied, "Why don't you call it 'Belly-Acres'?"

Anyway, the people led by Moses were so ungrateful they kept complaining and sinning against God. They so provoked God that more than a generation would pass before he would allow Israel to enter Canaan. Finally, under Joshua, God kept his promise and Israel was allowed into the Promised Land. Surely, they'd have learned their lesson by now. But they hadn't. Once in the Promised Land, Israel rejected the Lord again, worshiping idols and living in immorality.

For nearly a thousand years God pleaded with his people to return to him, but they refused. Kings, priests and people were all unfaithful. So God let his people be conquered and go into exile. But he kept a remnant alive, a small number that would come home again to rebuild their land. Someday from them, into the house of King David, a new King would be born. Jesus Christ, the adopted son of Joseph, was that new king.

But for Christ to save Israel, and all God's people, he had to take their place. He had to relive their wanderings, their sufferings, their temptations, without giving in to sin himself. He had to succeed where the people of God had failed. So that's what Jesus was doing, from the moment of his birth into poverty to his last breath on Calvary's cross.

As Israel was forced to flee death in Palestine to safety in Egypt, so was Jesus, yet without sin. As Israel was forced to wander in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land, so was Jesus, yet without sin. As Israel faced starvation and lack of water, so did Jesus, yet without sin. As Israel once in the Promised Land was to serve God faithfully but didn't, Jesus did, keeping all God's laws perfectly.

You and I are not literal descendants of Israel, yet the kinds of dangers and temptations they faced we've faced as well. In Egypt, Israel forgot God and despaired. In whatever Egypt we find ourselves today, we often forget God and despair. Jesus has been to Egypt with us, but he's remembered God, and trusted him in our place.

In the wilderness, Israel doubted God's provision and yearned for the comforts of Egypt, even if it meant slavery. Like Israel we sometimes wander in the wilderness and doubt God's ability to provide for us, so we try to get what we think we need in sinful ways. Jesus wandered in the wilderness, but trusted God in our place.

Israel finally made it to the Promised Land, but in the abundance of that place, they forgot the Lord and turned to other gods. In America, this land of plenty, we've often done the same. We complain about materialistic lifestyles, but we've done little to change that in our own lives. Faith becomes more of a decoration than a direction. Jesus said "No" to all the devil's temptations, choosing instead to live in holiness, to serve the needy, and to give his life for sinners.

You and I and all people have forfeited any blessing from God because of sin. But Jesus, who never sinned, took our place and died on Calvary's cross. Then on Easter morning he rose to bring life and forgiveness to all who believe.

That's what all these travels and journeys of Jesus are all about, beginning with his journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem and ending with his journey from Pontius Pilate's court to Calvary's cross. Jesus is taking our place. He is the second chance for all God's people. We failed in our journey. Jesus succeeded in his, in our place.

That's what the little sentence from Hosea quoted by Matthew is saying, "Out of Egypt I called my son." In one sense it refers to Israel in Egypt, being called home to the Promised Land. Israel was figuratively God's son. But Israel and you and I haven't always behaved like God's son. So Hosea looks far ahead in time and sees the perfect and true Son of God, Jesus Christ. As a little child he would go to Egypt for us, and then be called "out of Egypt" to go back to Israel where one day he would die on the cross, in our place.

When the helpless child Jesus braved the wilderness on that journey to Egypt, when he lived in a cave, when he endured a life of suffering that culminated with a fight to the death on the cross, he did it for you and me. His victory over sin and death was our victory. Just believe it and you can shout, "We won!" And it's not just a dream. It's the truth.