



## Sermon

Matthew 2:14-16  
January 3, 2010  
Epiphany Sunday  
Historic St. George's United Methodist Church  
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

### Notes on a Donkey Flight to Egypt

*After the scholars were gone, God's angel showed up again in Joseph's dream and commanded, "Get up. Take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt. Stay until further notice. Herod is on the hunt for the child, and wants to kill him." Joseph obeyed. He got and took the child and his mother under the cover of darkness. They were out of town and on their way by daylight. They lived in Egypt until Herod's death.*  
– Matthew 2:14-16, *The Message*

This text is traditionally referred to as the Holy Family's "flight" to Egypt. When I was a child, one of my Bible story books referred to this as such and I was confused. Wilbur and Orville Wright were not even a gleam in the great-great-great-great-great-great grandmother's eyes in Jesus' time, nor were there any US Air or Southwest airlines. Go ahead. Ask Mary. She'll tell you traveling by donkey is a lot of things, but "flight" is not one of them.

All we need to know about the Holy Family's "flight to Egypt" is that Joseph, who had listened to a dream about *NOT* running out on his pregnant wife-to-be Mary, now paid attention to yet another dream about the child she delivered, he named and scholars from the east came to adore. The dream said the child was in grave danger at the hands of dastardly King Herod. From this so called "flight to Egypt" (which ironically is as precarious as any flight in the Middle East nowadays) spring some legends that are quite interesting. These stories are little more than folklore about Jesus and the Holy Family's early life. But "Hark!" just the same. Like all good stories they carry meaning and morals somebody

wants you to know. Holy Scripture of not, listen for God in them anyway.

The first story is about an eventually caring crook and a felon with a heart. His name legend says is Dysmas. Stories about him are found in the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus* and *The Arabic Infancy Gospel* from the third or fourth centuries. Some may recognize the name from stories around Jesus' crucifixion when a man named Dysmas and another guy, hung on crosses on either side of Jesus. Long before that day, the legend says the Holy Family, fleeing to Egypt, was jumped by an unholy gang of thieves. "Let's waste 'em and grab their stuff," says the chief thief without one ounce of mercy on the vulnerable travelers with toddler in tow. I'm sure he thought he could get a pretty penny for that gold halo around baby Jesus' head. Not to mention all the gold, frankincense and myrrh stuffed in their luggage.

No matter. The legend says there was something about the baby Jesus that went straight to the heart of one of the thugs. So taken is he with the child that he prevails on his partners in crime not to harm the Holy Family. This man's name was Dysmas, the legend says. He is reputed to have said, "O most blessed of children, if there us ever a time for your having mercy on me, remember me and do not forget this hour." Baby Jesus and his family were dismissed (or Dysmas-ed) out of harms way to Egypt.

Fast-forward, years later; thirty-three to be exact, Jesus and Dysmas meet again – this time to the tune to the tune of the executioner's song. Hanging there on three crosses silhouetted by

strangely darkening skies at high noon on Good Friday, Dysmas says his "Remember me" to the now grown up, bleeding, dying Jesus. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," Dysmas says. And Jesus replies, "Today, mercy, forgiveness and paradise are yours."

That is legend number one. Here is legend number 2. When Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus were fleeing (or flying) to Egypt, evening approached on a certain day. Searching for shelter for the night, they came to a cave. It would be the best they could do for a night's refuge. Joseph said, "Look Mary, a cave, a cave!" And Mary said. "Cave schmave. First we sleep in a barn, now a cave. When are you gonna take me to a Holiday Inn?" But a cave was the best they could find.

The legend says that a spider who lived in the cave saw the baby Jesus and wished he could do something to help keep the child warm from the winter cold. Considering his own particular set of gifts and talents, the spider decided the best thing was to spin a web across the mouth of the cave. And so, the spider spun a tight curtain for the Holy Family's warmth and protection. Now the sinister music comes up. From out of the dark night comes a horrible hoard of Herod's henchmen, looking for children under the age of two to do you know what. They come upon the cave where Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus are hiding. The soldiers think AHA! What a great place for refugees to hide. They dismount, making ready to do a careful search, but the captain, obviously a bona fide woodsman and tracker, stops dead at the spider's web. "There can be no one hiding in that cave. Someone would have had to tear that spider web to gain entry. And look, not a single thread is disturbed." So, Herod's henchmen rode off. And if you listened carefully, you could hear one of the soldiers say, "Good thing we didn't have to go in there. Spiders give me the creeps! EEEEEeeeeccch!

So, the Holy Family was left safe and sound and were thus able to continue their way because of

an eeency-weeency spider spun a web across the entrance to their hiding place. And that, legend says is why we put tinsel on Christmas trees. Some people even have a spider on their tree as one of the ornaments. The glimmering, shining streamers strands of tinsel stand for the spider's web glistening with frost and snow stretched to save Jesus' family from danger.

What about these legends? The "silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright" skies of Christmas time come down to earth because of the realities of a dark, difficult world all around. The Gospel of Luke may welcome Jesus nativity with angelic operetta, but in Matthew the story is drenched in fear, suspicion, violence, blood and tears. In the last few weeks we have heard about the birth of Jesus in many terms. "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given and his name shall be called wonderful counselor, mighty God everlasting Father, prince of peace." Today, call him a refugee, an exile, a fugitive, an alien, a child of a homeless family in need of charity. And his family, too.

I served a church where people in the congregation sponsored a refugee family from Liberia to come to the US. They fled home, family, and country in fear of their lives. The patriarch of the family was a member of a political party on the outs. They had to pack all they could physically carry to a refugee camp before being repatriated to this country. A few years earlier, the same church sponsored another family who journeyed on foot from Guatemala through Mexico, through all kinds of arrests and detainments with US immigration police, who did everything they could to prevent entry into the safety of this country. This family had been marked by death squads in the 1980's. Some of the particulars are different but the same could be said of families in Darfur, the Sudan, or among survivors of recent Tsunamis and hurricanes.

How quickly we forget that sojourns to safety are as much a part of the Christmas story as stables, donkeys, shepherds, angels and wise men. Children's advocates like Marion Wright Edelman

and Jonathan Kozal remind us that children are still being sacrificed by political leaders and governments, none as notorious in our minds as the dreaded King Herod, but with policies just as devastating. Scant to non-existent health insurance among poor children in this country mean children like Jesus are in trouble in a nation where many go into debt to pay for Christmas but will turn a deaf ear as the government reduces services to these. Children and families at risk are part of the Christmas picture too. If there is any good news in these legends, much like the rest of Holy Scripture, it is that the message of a "God with us;" One who is not born away from realities such as these.

These notes on a donkey flight to Egypt, be they holy writ or legend, say that whether via dreams, voices, visiting angels, friendly felons, or even eeeency-weency spiders, God is on the side of refugees and exiles. It is gospel truth that folk on the run or in need of a hiding-place have a special place in God's heart. Whether in the hour of peril, the need to be on the run, in the face of evil, or just some safe place to lay your head, God is all about protection and refuge. Maybe these dire needs have never meant anything to you personally, but the words "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble," are all some people have while they hold on for dear life.

Did you ever stop to think that the reason we call our houses of worship "sanctuary" is because sanctuaries are safe places for refugees and exiles from all kinds of life distresses; unconditional havens for safety, rest, renewal and support when the physical or emotional equivalent of Herod's hoards are bearing down on you? God, spare us from the current trend of renaming our sanctuaries "worship centers" lest we miss a large part of who we are supposed to be and what we are supposed to be up to for Jesus' sake.

Another Christmas will soon be come and gone. We will be ready to fly back to our regular scenes and routines as though nothing much out of the ordinary happened. Take at least this much from

the story of the Epiphany of Jesus and its aftermath.

God is here and with us, a light shining in the darkness, present in our running for safety and shelter.

God is here in a surprise in the face of the friend you least expect to be your friend, appearing just when you need her, even in tiny, insignificant spider-sized gifts that turn out to be the most significant gift of all.

God is calling you to be that intervening friend in the right place at the right time.

God is calling you to be that sheltering spider, offering what gift you have to someone in danger.

One thing is for sure, God is always calling you and us to be a sanctuary for refugees whose meeting God and Jesus come by way of our openness and hospitality. Jesus Christ born at Christmas, Jesus Christ, brightest and best star of the morning, your incarnation means a lot of things. Let us never forget the part about a God who not only comes and dwells with us, but who in fleeing for fear, from evil, or whatever drives us on the lam, lives to make a way out of no way, and finally bring us home.

■■■ Amen ■■■