



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sunday January 3, 2016 – Christmas II

“...being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee: and he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.”

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

Joseph and Mary have had quite an adventure up until this point. Joseph, whether through profound faith, divine influence, or simple charity of heart, has embraced the notion that his virgin bride is pregnant with a child begotten of the Holy Ghost. During that pregnancy, they have made the arduous trip across Judea to Bethlehem for the census.

Then to add to the adventure, they have a birth that is daring and daunting, even by our standards. I mean, It's no secret that Alison and I are home birth enthusiasts; but when we have a home birth, I crank up the hot water heater an extra hundred degrees, and we fill a nice, sterile birthing tub full of hot water. Then Alison puts on some Tchaikovsky and the mid-wife shows up to lend a hand...sometimes. In contrast to this, the Blessed Mother is giving birth on a bed of hay, surrounded by animals chewing their cud and behaving like animals are wont to do.

Finally, they flee to Egypt to escape the murderous and bloodthirsty jealousy of the Roman-appointed king of the Jews, Herod the Great. Herod was so jealous and fearful of this newborn King of the Jews that he had all of the young male children in the vicinity of Bethlehem murdered, leaving Joseph and Mary no choice but to flee.

So one can hardly blame Joseph for what's implied here - that he intends perhaps to settle back down

where he's from, and restart his likely lucrative carpentry business. After all, sometimes enough adventure is just that - **enough**. And he gets a visit from the angel of The Lord, telling him that it's time to return, as Herod and his people are now dead.

And the truth is, if you listen very closely while reading this passage in its entirety, you can almost *hear* Joseph groan out loud; after all, as anybody who has ever been divinely inspired to undertake something knows, you have this internal groan, because nothing that's divinely inspired (or at least, very few things) is ever easy.

So in this case, Joseph is well content to put down roots where he is, because he's had enough adventure for one lifetime. Then the angel of The Lord appears to him and says “no, no, you're going elsewhere.” And I think most of us know that feeling, right? You have a clear plan laid out for life, and then you are unmistakably convicted in your heart that you are to go and do something else. And no matter what you do to tune it out, you can't ignore it; in the end, your reasonable plan for life gets chucked in the bin, and you go do something both unplanned and difficult, whether it's changing jobs or reconciling a relationship, or some other momentous task.

So they pack up and move, but when they draw nigh to their destination, they discover that Herod the Great's son, Herod Archelaus has taken over, and that

he's just as jealous and bloodthirsty as his father. As The Who sang, "meet the new boss, same as the old boss." Joseph is warned in a dream to avoid this new murderous tyrant, and takes his family instead to Nazareth, a town of such little renown that it is not mentioned in the Old Testament at all, nor is it mentioned by Josephus.

But that's what happens when you make plans, no matter how well-intentioned, and God has something else in mind. In this case, Joseph seemed to think that Bethlehem was an appropriate and nice enough city to raise The Messiah in, but God instead judged that a little podunk town despised by the Jews would instead be a better training ground for the Savior of the World. And make no mistake, this is a town that was indeed despised - In John 1:46, Nathaneal asks "*Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?*"

The fact is, this was all obviously quite intentional - as indeed all of God's plans and movements are. Through Herod's sin and jealousy, Jesus starts His earthly life in exile. We, through the ongoing stain of original sin, begin our lives in exile - we are exiled from the holiness of God, and we prolong and exacerbate that by our own sins and shortcomings. And you'd think that through the sacrament of baptism and reconciliation to God through Jesus, that we'd cease living in exile, wouldn't you? But instead of ending our exile, we wind up merely shifting it - after all, to be a Christian and to actually walk the walk logically results in us being exiles from the world. For the Christian who truly walks in faith, life is a sort of exile-in-perpetuity.

Again following the model of Jesus' early life, even when we end that first exile, the exile from God's holiness, we do not suddenly ascend to some earthly role of glory or prominence. As I have said before, Jesus models our entire lives for us and this time is no different. He could have been raised in Bethlehem, a bit of a hub town at the time, or in a prosperous suburb; instead, he was raised in a city that was despised - the armpit of Judea, as it were.

So the message in this brief lesson on geopolitics is simply that if we find ourselves vacillating between exile and humility and back again, is that this is the path Christ blazed for us, and one for which we are indeed intended. We live in a state of exile, as our

Savior was exiled. We continue to work to change the world and bear witness to the grace of God from a place of humility and modest stature because Jesus did the same thing.

Finally, we can also find in this passage a perfect example of why so many secular schools and colleges have courses such as "The Bible as Literature." You see, Matthew's Gospel is the Gospel from the Jewish perspective, written in Hebrew for a Jewish audience. When I said that Nazareth wasn't mentioned in the Old Testament, I was being entirely literal - it's not even mentioned by the prophets. You see, when Matthew says "*that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene,*" he's actually being witty. None of the prophets suggested that the Messiah would come from the town of Nazareth. Rather, Matthew is engaging in a bit of word play - the word "natsar" or "natser" in Hebrew means "branch," and OT prophecy is ripe with references to the Messiah as a branch. Isaiah 11:1 tells us "*And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.*" A little while later, Isaiah 60:21 says "*Thy people also shall be all righteous: they shall inherit the land for ever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified.*" Matthew is reminding us that Jesus of Bethlehem, now Jesus of Nazareth, is the "branch" foretold by the prophets, and the means by which God will ultimately be glorified.

There's a purpose in this, and it's **not** that God simply likes making people move around: the next time you're feeling small, or ineffectual, or like you are in no position to serve God and take part in the great commission, remember this: Christianity is the only religion where man is reconciled to God (by any name) through an act where it is God who humbles Himself. In every other religion, man is reconciled to God or the gods by either works, war, or self-denial. In Christianity, man is reconciled to God because God humbled Himself to join us, and to reconcile us to him in the person of Jesus Christ; Jesus of Nazareth, the despised little town that nobody liked and historians ignored.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen