



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA
The Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick
The 1st Sunday After Christmas- December 29, 2019
Sermon Title: "Hopes and Dreams"
Gospel Text: Matthew 2:13-23

If ever there is a night when the hope of a child can be seen it is Christmas Eve. I saw it in abundance here at Grace at our 4:30 service. The room was filled to capacity with hopes and dreams. So why are we back in the midst of burdens and sorrows so soon in the gospel?

Where the dreams of Joseph are more like nightmares-

"Someone is going to try to kill your son- flee!"

"Ok, it's safe now, and you belong at home-GO back!"

"But wait, not there, there is a new killer in charge- go over here instead! Sorry, there is no going home."

No wonder as an adult, Jesus will say, "the Son of Man has no place to rest his head."

The dream the people long to see fulfilled was for a Messiah.

The Holy Family spends what turns out to be years steeped in fears, violence and repression, with finding refuge as their primary hope and dream.

I doubt Joseph or any of us would want this to be our only dream.

You know it's bad when the angel does not say to Joseph, "Do not be afraid." But rather, "Get up and go!"

Beyond Herod's dominion- he's an insecure man with a taste for blood. Wrath is his middle name.

After fighting for several years to gain control, he has never felt secure. Bring on the private security force, walls and fortresses so he feels defended no matter where he goes. He kills his own descendants, his wife and one of his sons out of fear they will take the kingdom from him. Before he dies, he kills all the political prisoners in the country so that everyone will be plunged into mourning.

But, actually Herod doesn't do the killing- he never swings a sword.

Others do so at his command or whim.

But it's complicated, because he is the king of building projects. Though not born Jewish, he even rebuilds the temple. Either because a ratty looking temple is ruining his brand, or so now he has free sway with the religious leaders because he built their dream- even branded it Herod's temple. It's the best temple ever and he employs 1000 priests to build it in record time.

And so... despite all of the wrath, people are seemingly immune, even to the death of children.

And so... the Holy Family runs.

Egypt is hardly the first place they want to return.

But they listen to God as the angel spurs Joseph to get up under the cloak of darkness, pack up and take off.

The shortest route was about 430 miles, but to be safe, they probably took more dangerous circuitous routes to avoid attention and Herod's forces.

How often did they look over a shoulder worrying if Herod's spies will find them?

Could they even sleep long enough to dream? Much less hope?

The Coptic Christian church in Egypt has a rich heritage of having hosted these holy refugees. It seems the longest they stayed anywhere was 6 months.

Possibly staying in as many as 30 places over a couple years.

One story tells of them being robbed, thieves even ripping off Mary's veil.

They were rumored to have traveled down the Nile by boat, and to have sheltered in caves. Sometimes welcomed, and sometimes not.

In the infancy gospel of Jesus, writings beyond our Scripture, legend has it that the concerned Christ child bent a palm tree to shield his overheated mother in shade, and caused springs to rise up for water in the desert.

It's a pretty precarious existence.

All in all, they had every reason to feel insecure.

Like it or not, the gospel of Matthew looks at things as they are.

If ever there was a world that needs a Savior, it is this one. Then and now.

But, if we will look to see it, Matthew radically shifts our view to affirm that God is with us, and working even amidst the worst we can do.

In our world riddled with violence and the actions and consequences of sin- the myriad ways we separate ourselves from others.

Even where the deaths of children are mere statistics as we turn down the volume on the wailing.

Still- nothing will defeat God's promise to be with us and to save us.

Redemption comes regardless of the world's activity to the contrary.

Yes, the forces of domination loom large in swords, and armies and rulers.

But can you see the forces of God?

They show up too to further hopes and dreams.

The forces of God show up in the Magi- essentially astrologers from a non-God worshipping land- who God uses to worship Christ, and who then trick and defy Herod by NOT going back his way and NOT telling him what desires to know.

The forces of God show up in the angels, who bring dream messages to command both the Magi AND Joseph.

And the forces of God must show up in ways not officially recounted in Matthew.

In the people along the way of the refugees who probably had the chance to earn some money or favor and report this sketchy trio, but don't. Who provide food or water, or shelter, or directions. Maybe amongst the shepherds they must have passed by night; amidst the places they may have rested by day.

Let's be honest, in order for there to today be so many "sites" of note in Egypt, people had to have been talking.

The people of Egypt, not an obvious place for support, provided for the family. And despite wanting to kill Jesus, Herod will die without doing so. God's hopes and dreams will be fulfilled.

God's actions in the world initiate all human activity.

The question is whose commands will we heed?

Beyond the gloom of the world-

what dreams do we wish Joseph COULD have had?

For himself, for Mary, for the child?

We serve a provident God, who comes to the devout, the compassionate, the dreaming and the trusting. To renew our hope even when there are plenty of markers to the contrary.

God also comes to call us to show up and participate.

Whose dreams will we fulfill?

The gospel envisions us as part of the force of God in the world, even when it seems unpopular or the recipients seem sketchy.

If Joseph could speak he probably would say that he dreamed of being secure, and protected and welcomed;

Being able to rest and settle and thrive;

To know peace, not fear.

Scripture tells us these are God's hopes and dreams for all God's children.

When people look for signs of this God in this world, where will they be found?