

*Leaving Home*  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Christmastide  
December 29, 2019  
Trinity Bixby  
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[Matthew 2:13-23](#)  
[Isaiah 63:7-9](#)

Merry Christmas! It's our traditional Christmas greeting – to wish someone a happy, joyous, merry Christmas. For months now, it seems, Christmas music has been piped into our lives, through the radio, through our own playlists and even in the stores we visit. And the music is nearly always major-key, traditional music meant to lift our spirits. And now, here we are, in Christmastide – the season of the Church Year that follows the birth of Jesus. For twelve days, from Christmas Day on Dec 25 to Epiphany on Jan 6, the church celebrates the birth of Jesus, our savior. The stories of Jesus' birth are proclaimed over and over, from the holy family's journey to Bethlehem, where Mary gives birth, to the wise ones arriving sometime later. That's what makes our lectionary text so weird today – it's jumping ahead in the story, beyond where we are in the church year. Instead of being about Jesus' birth, it's about what happened to him AFTER the wise ones "left by another route." It's like we're hearing minor-key Christmas music – or greeting each other with "Melancholy Christmas."

Is it any wonder that this isn't read as often in the world at large? Unlike the main narrative of Christmas, this isn't an obviously hope- and miracle-filled story of Jesus being born – but the mundane story, with awful real-world implications. Jesus' family is forced to flee from Bethlehem to Egypt, and even when they learn that their persecutor, King Herod the Great, has died, they find out that even his son, Herod Archelaus, is continuing the policies of his father, and it's not safe in Bethlehem.

But they want to come back to their home – a home that, according to Matthew, they've never before lived in as a family. So they make the best of a bad

situation, and settle in Nazareth, in the Galilee, the north-west province of Palestine – which was ruled by another of Herod’s sons, Herod Antipas, who shows up at the end of Jesus’ life, as the one who orders John the Baptist’s death, and in conversation with Pontius Pilate.

This is a story of fear. Of being forced to fleeing across borders into unfamiliar lands, and yearning to return home. It is, in miniature, the story of the Hebrew people. Sure, the details differ – the family flees *into* Egypt, rather than out of it, and they return from exile from Egypt rather than Babylon, but the major themes are still all here: Fear, flight, far-travel, and finally, return.

At the beginning of this story, the holy family fears for their lives, just like many people in the world. They fear, rightly as it turns out, that their ruler would rather kill any threat to his power than take even a small chance that he would be dethroned. Herod the Great would be the last king of Judea – and he intended to insure that no one would threaten his power. He famously killed his first wife and their two sons, on the rumor that they might want to take power from him before his death. He gave the order that on his death, men throughout Jerusalem should be killed at random, so that even if the people wouldn’t mourn his death directly, their mourning for their own families would be attributed to him.

It shouldn’t be surprising, then, that this was a man to be feared – especially if he had been warned that “the King of the Jews” had been born nearby. You see, for all that Herod was King of Judea, he was not born a Jew, and could not be called King of the Jews. A person with that title – even a baby – could be a real challenge to his rule. And what did he have to do to prevent it? Why, kill a few babies, who could hardly defend themselves. This is the horror of the situation that Joseph and Mary were able to avoid, by fleeing home. Leaving whatever place in Bethlehem that they had made for themselves, to travel into the unknown.

Leaving home, knowing that to return meant persecution, arrest, and likely death at the hands of the local authorities.

But what happens when we turn this story in a different way?

Then, Mary and Joseph are leaving home, knowing that God is with them.

God's loving care guides and nurtures them, whether they're in Bethlehem, the City of David, or as far away as the foreign lands of Egypt. In leaving home, they have learned to rely on God's promise of love and care for them, no matter their circumstances. And when they return to their homeland, and set up a new life for themselves in the tiny village of Nazareth, they blossom into their lives. While the fear that drove them into exile is with them and their family, their love for God is stronger than their fear. And, through it all, God shows us that God knows what it means to be human. That God's son wasn't born with a silver spoon and no worries for the rest of his days - but with a heart made golden by love for others and trust in God's plan.

That's why the words of the prophet Isaiah to the people of Israel echo so strongly at Christmastide: "During all their distress, God also was distressed, so a messenger who served God saved them."<sup>1</sup> We Christians can hear Jesus in this verse as that saving messenger, the one whose life, death, and resurrection reshaped our world. And we also see that this acknowledges the pain of the world – that God does not condone the violence, the hatred, the horror that humanity suffers and brings about. Instead, God calls us to care for each other, especially strangers, outcasts, and foreigners – just as Mary and Joseph are able to find a place to stay, first in Bethlehem, then in Egypt, and later in Nazareth.

The lessons Jesus learns as a baby are powerfully stamped on his ministry. Looking way ahead in his life, when he begins to call others to follow him, he explicitly tells them to leave home and follow him.<sup>2</sup> He makes a point to not exclude people – eating with sinners and tax collectors, healing Romans, Samaritans, Syrians, and others, opening discussions with Pharisees, Sadducees, women and men, people from all walks of life. To the rich, Jesus says to give up their security in wealth by giving it to those who have little-to-nothing – and to the hungry poor, Jesus offers food in abundance. He calls people to care for each other, remembering the ancient words to love the foreigner just as you love your own family. And, as he

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 63:9

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 4:18-22, c.f. Luke 18:28-29

wanders on his journey towards Jerusalem and the culmination of his ministry, he stays in the homes of people he meets along the way, not taking a permanent home.

Indeed, in the gospel of John, Jesus reminds the disciples that his home is not an earthly one, but with his heavenly father. “In my Father’s house,” Jesus says, “there are many rooms... When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am.”<sup>3</sup>

Given the tumult of Jesus’ early years, being uprooted from one place after another, he found comfort and security in knowing that his home wasn’t here on Earth at all – but in Heaven. And with that comfort, rather than selfishly keep it for himself, as many people might have been tempted to do, he shared it freely with those around him.

That’s the hope of this Christmas story – the hope that lies behind the fear, the distress, the displacement. No matter what we experience, the highs or lows of life, Jesus calls us to follow him. He teaches us that it’s ok to feel like an outsider – to be feeling like we’re filled with minor-key Christmas music, even when the world tries to get us to feel in a major-key. So, whether it’s a Merry or Melancholy Christmas, we are all on a journey, leaving home and trusting in God’s loving care. And, ultimately, we will all find our way home again, where Jesus has prepared us a place.

As you journey through this world, may you follow in Jesus’ Way, taking comfort in the love of the Holy Spirit, until you can once again be home with God, in whom is peace. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> John 14:2-3