

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh
January 3, 2021- The 2nd Sunday of Christmas (B)
Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

Jeremiah 31.7-14; Psalm 84; **Ephesians 1.3-6, 15-19; Matthew 2.13-15, 19-23**

'I pray that ...the Father of Glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that... you may know the hope to which he has called you... and his power for us who believe.' †

Merry Christmas!

It's important to remember that we are still in the 12 days of Christmastide. So often, society tells us it's all over and we need to move on, but the Church wants us to savor this time... to relish in the incarnation. The ancient Church and early Christians did, praying to 'know the hope to which he has called you... his power for us who believe.'

Today's Epistle from Ephesians is really one of the first Christian hymns of praise. It's probably not from the apostle Paul, but written in the later part of the 1st century by some of his followers. The beginning of it is strange, just one, long, run-on sentence in Greek. It relays the basic, remarkable tenets of our Christian faith:

- there is an eternal divine plan for the universe
- the mystery of this plan has been revealed in
 Jesus Christ
- we (believers in Christ) are adopted children of God
- and through our faith in Christ and our adoption as
 God's children, we are empowered to do Christ's
 work in the world.

Together these define the early Christian understanding of "the Church"—*ecclesia*— who we are as the Body of Christ, as believers.... And also of the great "plan" of God—*oikonomia*— or "economy" of God... God's plan of salvation for the world. It all sounds very mysterious and ethereal, and that's probably why the Church combines this passage with Matthew's Gospel narrative about human struggle.

Matthew's story of the birth and childhood of Jesus is grounded in historical events and actual geographical locations. The story we heard today—of the flight of the Holy Family from Herod's wrath to Egypt, their subsequent return to Nazareth in Galilee under the more benign Herod Antipas, and of Joseph's vivid dream sequences that allow for his family to be rescued from harm's way—highlights God's providence and deliverance of the child, Jesus... and evokes images from the history of Israel, of the exodus and deliverance from Egypt.

These are meant to persuade us that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's eternal promise—the expected one, who will deliver God's people in a new exodus.

When I reflect on this story of the family's flight through Egypt and Palestine, I think about the many people who are 'displaced' in our world today. Jesus and his family were refugees, living far from their homeland. I can't help but wonder what it's like to be displaced, to suddenly be

an outcast... like the refugees we hear and read about from Syria and Mexico... My mind immediately takes me to consider how so many of us are separated from our own families because of the COVID 19 pandemic... of those who are feeling the pain of isolation and loneliness, who are homeless, or in hospitals and nursing homes, or who are imprisoned, and of all who are somehow separated from their 'normal' home for whatever reason. And how Jesus experienced the same hardships and shared the same feelings we do... he knows what it is to be far from the place we call home, from the place we yearn to be.... Jesus understands disappointment and fear, and unexpected events.

Matthew's Gospel gives us a glimpse at the tremendous violence that surrounded Jesus' family, highlighting that the incarnation took place in the real world—one of cruelty, uncertainty, and fear. Matthew dares us to see things as they really are, and also to recognize that God is always present and at work in the midst of the worst of human experience. Despite the uncertainty of the world around us, and our own failings... God writes straight with crooked lines. That's the joy of Christmas—nothing can defeat God's promise of IMMANUEL, 'God with us'... nothing is greater than God's love and promise of peace!

In the Epistle, we're told we are "Children of God." And that the whole idea of Christmas, the incarnation, was decided long before the world was made...

Though I'm not a believer in 'Predestination', or of 'destiny' ... because I know of God's gift of free will... I must admit that this passage makes a fairly good case for God's providence— our lives are not necessarily our own.

To the extent that we try to make our lives solely our own, and try to control our world, we are out of step with God's 'economy'... out of rhythm with God's eternal design... and not following God's purpose and call.

God has 'blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places'... Christ's rule and work is cosmic! To be God's children, we must recognize that we cannot do it alone... It's not about independence, autonomy, or self-reliance, as the world tells us... if this pandemic has taught us anything, it's how important it is for humans to help each other, and rely on one another... and to rely on God.

We have been called to live in Christ, as Christ... to follow God's design with love and patience. We are called as children of God to forgive, to embrace God's mission of love and reconciliation. Especially now... when our patience is wearing thin and we're prone to lose our temper at work, or with our loved ones, and even with ourselves. We are called to forgive--to forgive others and to forgive ourselves!

Many of us may feel that God is absent in the world... 'I don't see God! God doesn't seem present in my life. The world is so scary and unpredictable... there's too much illness and death all around... My life seems crazy, it is crazy... and I have too much to worry about!'

For all of us who feel that way, today's scriptures remind us:

God does, indeed, 'move and act in this world...

God moves and acts in this world through us!

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