

The righteousness of Joseph

Second Sunday of Christmas, 2020

After the wise men had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

- Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

Just a few days ago, I hiked with my family through a majestic red rock canyon near St. George, Utah. A setting sun made the place doubly enchanting. We paused atop a rock outcropping, where our son Owen whispered, *"It's so quiet!"*

Then, far overhead, we saw a pinkish contrail from a jet. Our older son Eliot pulled out his iPhone and held it up to the sky. I thought he was taking a photo, until he said, *"That's a KLM flight from Las Vegas to Amsterdam."* *"You're kidding,"* I said. And then he explained, *"It's an App on my phone. You point it at any commercial plane in the sky and it tells you where it came from, and where it's headed, and everything about it."*

I was amazed to learn of yet another mind-boggling new technology. But in that moment there was also a part of my heart that fleetingly wished I could hold up my iPhone to God and learn a precise flight path and destination for my own life.

That thought may have arisen then because I had just finished reading through some journal entries from a year ago. In January 2019, Brooke and I devoted two half days together to identify our priorities for the year ahead ... but you probably know the saying: *We make plans. God laughs.*

Our marital plans and my journal entries of a year ago were blind to the possibility that Brooke and our daughter Grace would now be living in St. George, Utah. I couldn't have guessed a year ago that my resilient 92-year-old mother would die, as she did this past August. I wouldn't have believed a year ago that our national politics could become even more polarized and vengeful. If you had told me a year ago that our Sunday morning attendance at Ascension for 2019 would be down another 7% in the first months of the year and then up 18% in the last months of the year, I may not have believed either statistic.

Some of you may recall some *God laughs* moments—whether a dream, good fortune, sorrows, or whatever you could not have previously imagined. You may know the anxiety of changes in plans and looking for God in the unexpected, or what it's like to choose a path that seems to have come from on high but that, we know, will cost us

dearly: Others won't believe us or understand. The sacrifices will be more than we ever bargained for.

This lens may better prepare us to take another look at Joseph, the protagonist in today's appointed gospel. We also scrutinized Joseph two Sundays ago. We mainly considered how the gospel author known as Matthew leveraged the genealogical pedigree of Joseph to build a case for the legitimacy of Jesus as Messiah. That argument continues on today's text, but here I'm equally interested in the ground level view of Joseph. How often did he wonder how he got into this complicated and frightening situation? How did his character and his faith evolve along the way?

Just a year ago for Joseph, all was going according to plan. He may have had a little extra skip in his step – and then later a furled brow -- because he was engaged to the girl of his dreams, literally. After Mary's pregnancy -- not by him -- an angel of the Lord comes to Joseph in a dream: *'do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.'*

After the baby is born, there was that wondrous but peculiar visit by those star-gazing foreigners. We will hear their story tomorrow, on the Feast of Epiphany. And then we come right away to today's story, commonly called the Flight into Egypt. The drama moves along and Joseph and his new family are guided, challenged and shaped by three more pivotal dreams.

Matthew may have included these dreams in the story to recall another biblical Joseph, also a big dreamer, whose story is told in the Book of Genesis. After his vivid and provocative dreams, his enraged brothers first threw him down a well and later retrieved him and sold him to slave-traders headed for ... guess where? Egypt. By these dreams of Joseph, Matthew may be connecting Jesus the Messiah to the salvation story of Israel that begins with the Joseph and continues with the deliverance through Moses described in Exodus. *"Out of Egypt have I called my son,"* writes Matthew, quoting the prophet Hosea.

In the reading that we heard on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, Matthew introduces Joseph using the word 'righteous.' One classic reference work explains that the Greek word, *dikaios* (δικαιος) may describe someone *'whose way of thinking, feeling, and acting is wholly conformed to the will of God ...'* Righteousness is partly about standards that are codified in religion and that are, at their best, genuine expressions of divine qualities: compassion, justice, faith, hope and love.

But as Joseph illustrates, or as you or I may otherwise know, righteousness also takes unique shape, it withers or flourishes, may be revised or rewritten, in particular lives and particular circumstances.

Think of a few people you've known who you would describe as righteous. I'm guessing that they are not clones. Each brings a new meaning to righteousness based on the raw material of her or his life. Few would say that what they mean by righteousness is the same as when they first began to follow Jesus. Many struggle when they feel compelled to defy the old rule book. Some have had dreams, seemingly from God, directing them to Egypt or other strange destinations. Many would describe turning points and decisions in which they felt utterly alone, as may have been the case with Joseph.

I wonder if Joseph may have appreciated, and if some of us may appreciate, the well-known Tolkein poem from the Lord of the Rings. Bilbo Baggins sings:

*The Road goes ever on and on,
Down from the door where it began
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with eager feet,
Until it joins some larger way,
 where many paths and errands meet,
And whither then? I cannot say.
Amen.*