



January 6, 2008
Epiphany

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23
Hope Settles In
M. Craig Barnes

*Into the wild and painful cold of the starless winter night
came the refugees,
slowly making their way to the border.
The man, stooped from age or anxiety,
hurried his small family through the wind. . . .
His eyes, black and alert,
darted from side to side, then over his shoulder,
then back again forward.
Had they been seen?
Had they been heard?
Every rustle of wind, every sigh from the child,
sent terror through his chest. . . .
He glanced at the young woman, his bride.
No more than a child herself,
she nuzzled the newborn, kissing his neck.
She looked up, caught his eye, and smiled.
Oh, how the homelessness had taken its toll on her!
Her eyes were red, her young face lined,
her lovely hair matted from inattention,
her clothes stained from milk and baby,
her hands chapped from the raw wind of winter.
She'd hardly had time to recover from childbirth
when word had come that they were hunted. . . .
Suddenly, the child began to make small noises.
The man drew his breath in sharply;
the woman quietly put the child to breast.
Fear . . . long dread-filled moments. . . .
Huddled, the family stood still in the long silence.
At last the man breathed deeply again,
reassured they had not been heard.
And into the night continued
Mary and Joseph and the Babe.*

This poem, titled "Refugees," written by Ann Weems, describes so vividly what that awful night must have looked like for the Holy Family as they fled Bethlehem. The scene she describes, the scene the Gospel of Matthew describes, does not look so holy. It looks like running away.

How different this night was from the other nights of the Christmas drama. Maybe as they fled into the dark, Joseph remembered when the angel came to him in a dream to tell him, "Mary's child will be Emmanuel—God with us." And the night the child was born when those shepherds came with their vision of angels proclaiming the birth of

the Savior. And the night the Wise Men followed a star to the place where they were staying in Bethlehem and worshipped their child as if he were a king. But now, on this dark night, they are fleeing the country because in another dream, the angel warned Joseph about the wrath of King Herod who wanted to kill their baby.

Herod we know all too well. He lives within each of us. Herod is a tyrant who enslaves us with fear. He will do anything—anything to stay in power of our lives. Herod will tell you that you can't afford to take the risk you feel called to make, or that you aren't smart enough to succeed in your new job, or that you don't deserve to be loved by those trying to love you. He keeps you off balance by making you afraid, and he does that because he himself is afraid. What Herod fears more than anything else are the dreams the angels of God have brought us. God's dream is that you become free of Herod, which is why the heavens called the Christ Child our Savior. He came to be the new, liberating king. But now that we are in the days after all of the excitement of Christ's birth, don't be surprised if Herod has already tried to destroy all the hope we proclaimed at Christmas. That's what Herod does.

If I were writing this story, when the soldiers of Herod began to march toward Bethlehem, I would have had baby Jesus hold up his little hand and make them all fall to their knees. Then there would be a mass conversion and maybe a rebellion against Herod. But that's not what happened. What happened was the angel of God told Joseph in a dream: "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt."

Flee. Run. Get out of town. It is striking how many times in the Bible a good person has to flee. As a young man, Moses had to flee when the Egyptians were out to kill him. David had to flee Saul. Jesus had to walk away when the people tried to throw him off of a cliff. The early apostles had to flee Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen. And Paul had to escape Damascus in a basket.

How do you know when it is time to take on Herod and fight, and when it is time to run? According to the text, it all depends on the dream. The Christmas dream wasn't to fight Herod. It was to save the people. Moses' dream wasn't to defeat the Egyptians but to liberate the Hebrews. David's dream wasn't to kill Saul but to become the shepherd king of Israel. Paul's dream wasn't to convert Damascus, but to convert the Roman Empire. And your dream isn't to be a success at work but to be a success in the stewardship of life. Your dream isn't to win an argument but to win intimacy in your relationships.

Never confuse the great dream with the battle that is before you. You may think the battle is necessary to fulfill the dream. But a battle is not necessarily even helpful to our dreams. For the sake of the dream, you may have to step away from some battles—for a while. My old piano teacher used to always tell me that the right note played at the wrong time is the wrong note. I have long given up playing piano, but that advice has always stayed with me. And it is also the legacy of the flight to Egypt. Bethlehem wasn't where Jesus would take his stand. That would have to wait for Golgotha.

Just as the Bible has plenty of references to people walking away from battles, so does it have many illustrations of those same people walking into conflicts and great battles. The challenge is knowing when to fight and when to walk away, which again depends on the dream God has given you.

As Jesus' flight to Egypt proclaims, never fight a battle when the dream won't come true even if you win. And as Jesus' death on the cross proclaims, never flee a battle when the dream will still come true even if you lose. But this all assumes that you are clear about the dream.

The second half of our text today tells us that young Jesus outlasted Herod, just as he continues to outlast every tyrant. And the hope of the world that appeared to be on the run, returned home after another dream to settle into the ordinary town of Nazareth. So Egypt wasn't the permanent home of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. But neither was Bethlehem, where the nativity occurred. Christmas is not the place where we stay. It is the place where we receive the good news of salvation—news that is so good, it will threaten every Herod in every life. But a time comes for that hope to settle into the ordinary places of life. That's the way the dream works.

January is not my favorite month. The joy and festivity of Christmas is now behind us. We have already begun boxing up the nativity characters and the ornaments and tucking them away as if we were packing away our hope.

Our next big deal isn't really until Easter, which seems a long way off. In between Christmas and Easter is just a whole lot of winter with gray days and ordinary routines. All we have to get us through now are a few New Year's resolutions and some plans for a summer vacation. But there is something else. There is also Jesus, quietly growing up in an ordinary town.

Matthew ends his second chapter with Mary and Joseph following the dream to raise their child in Nazareth. Then he begins the third chapter with the baptism of Jesus at the age of thirty. There is a whole lot of time in Jesus' life that is unaccounted. At least Luke tells us one story of Jesus at the age of twelve in the temple. But not Matthew. For him there is just a very large blank space between these dramatic chapters of Jesus' life.

It has always been hard for the church to accept this blank spot in Jesus' life. We want to know what kind of child he was. By the third century, some interesting folktales began to circulate about Jesus as a child. Many of these were collected in a document called the Infancy Gospels. According to one story, Jesus went to play with some other boys who hid from him. Upon finding them, Jesus turned them into lambs and told them to come to the shepherd. Another story tells us that Jesus and some other children were playing on a roof. One of the boys accidentally fell off and was killed. The other children all ran away leaving Jesus alone. When the parents of the dead boy came, they blamed Jesus for pushing their son off of the roof. Jesus said he didn't do it, but the boy's parents didn't believe him. So Jesus said, "Well, let's ask the dead kid." The boy came back to life and said no, he just fell.

It is not surprising that none of these stories made it into the Bible. They have no spiritual purpose, they are inconsistent with other things we know about Jesus, and they were not written by any of the apostles. But even more importantly, they make the mistake of filling in the blanks in the story. Those blanks were inspired by the Holy Spirit in the writing of the Bible. The blank spots in Scripture claim sometimes hope is quiet, subtle, and at work behind the scenes.

We see this even in Jesus' adult life. Even after he began his ministry, he had plenty of ordinary time when there were no battles and no miracles. Some days had to be spent doing laundry, going to the dentist, or washing the camel. If we add up all the events recorded in the gospels during Jesus' three years of ministry, they only account for one year. That means that at the end of two out of every three days, he looked at Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and said, "Don't even write this one down."

It is hard to believe, however, that even an ordinary day with Jesus would seem ordinary. If you knew that you were going to spend a day with Jesus, it would seem pretty special. Even if nothing happened that was worth writing down, you would treasure every moment just because you were with Jesus. Of course, after the Savior has entered the world, that is exactly what you do have. Another day with Jesus. That is the great Epiphany. And that has always been God's dream for you. Amen.

Benediction. Never allow the ordinary to blind you to the sacred mystery that lies just beneath the surface. Emmanuel is now with us. Amen.