

**Second Sunday after Christmas (Christmas 2A) – January 5, 2014**  
**Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a;**  
**Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

Here on this 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas we have a rather abrupt shift from the blessed scene of Jesus' nativity. No sooner have Mary and Joseph run out of a few days worth of swaddling clothes—and no sooner have the three wise men from the east come and left their gifts and departed—than the birth of this child comes up against powerful forces. According to Matthew the first thing to happen in the wider community after the birth of the Savior was a genocide—Herod's brutal slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem—his massacre of all the children in Bethlehem under two years of age in hopes that the recently born Messiah would be one of them. Today we read of the Holy Family's flight into Egypt just before this slaughter. Joseph got word in a dream that the ruthless King Herod was planning to hunt down and murder their child. Stabbed awake by the realization that Herod even had three of his own sons killed when he saw them as rivals, Joseph that very night took the child and Mary and began the journey to Egypt. This is a terrible story, but also a terribly common occurrence in our world—a family running for their lives, a refugee family—in Afghanistan, Iraq, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Syria and so many other places—happening right now. As the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees stated recently, the number of refugees or forcibly displaced people in the world is now more than 45.2 million people, and has increased by more than two million in just the past year.

In our gospel we see the vulnerability of the Christ Child and the resoluteness of his parents to take action in the face of great danger. Here we see two kinds of power at work—that of Herod: fearsome, violent, tyrannical; the other of the Holy Family: vulnerable and silent, yet resolute and courageous. Let's look a little more at the Holy Family and the challenges and promise that underlie their power for us. How do we often perceive Jesus, Mary and Joseph? Proud parents with babe in arms. A trio of holy perfection. An idyllic family group that has inspired some of the finest art through the ages, and nourishes us today as the embodiment of love, togetherness and peace. In paintings they appear as a family blessedly free from strife and stress. Well, obviously not, as we listen to our gospel account this morning.

The story behind the serene family picture is, of course, one that could happen right now. A pregnant teenager is married in haste to a man who knows he is not the father. The birth takes place on the road in dire poverty, followed by escape to a foreign land to evade the authorities. Then a pause, for years of the life of hard-scrabble child-rearing. Finally, the young man grows up to rebel against the powers that be and the mother is forced to witness his execution.

It's the kind of human interest tragedy that might make us shudder for a moment listening to the nightly news. It's the kind of story we hear over and over again from far away places, but is also told by many thousands living nearby who have experienced something like this first hand. So, why don't we think of the Holy Family with the same shudder and sorrow? The answer, of course, is that we know the end of their story. We have read our gospels and we know both the tragedy and the triumph of the Cross, and the glory of the Resurrection. We know those halos above the heads of the Holy Family are real.<sup>i</sup>

This Holy family makes it clear that the family, in all its diverse forms, is the first and vital cell of any society. It's where we learn—or fail to learn—about God, life, love and responsibility. A strong grounding in this primary community of family—in my own case, with a single mom and one sister—this community of family, small as it may be, can provide a strong grounding for one's own sense of dignity, and help give each of us some degree of resiliency, and a healthy self-esteem – a necessary prerequisite for relating well with others. And the family has a major contribution to make in addressing questions of social justice, as it is where we first learn, form and act on our values.

From the Holy Family and our own families, we must move to the larger human family. As Frederick Buechner points out, the “human family” is “a good phrase, reminding us not only that we come from the same beginning and are headed toward the same conclusion but that in the meantime our lives are elaborately and inescapably linked. A famine in one part of the world affects people in all parts of the world. An assassination in Dallas or Sarajevo affects everybody.”<sup>ii</sup> And as William Sloane Coffin stated, “We are not our brother's keeper; but we are our brother's brother or sister.” In other words, our human unity is not something we are called upon to create as much as to recognize it as having been there all along and written into the very fabric of our existence. We all belong to one another, for that is the way God made us. And Christ lived and died to keep us that way. Coffin adds, “Our sin is only and always that we put asunder what God has joined together.”<sup>iii</sup>

The Church is often seen through the paradigm of family; and because of this, creates a culture of loving relationships and mutual care, and establishes ministries to enhance family life through various means—all of which are valid and necessary parts of the church's mission. Most of us have experienced church life that was cold and distant when this culture or ministry was absent. Some of us have also experienced an intensity of “family feeling” in some churches that felt good, but did not go beyond the garden gate to share that with those who were not a part of the “holy huddle,” as it were, of that congregation. The paradigm of the church as a family thus needs to be part of a larger paradigm of the church as a public community whose mission is to create communities of healing and wholeness, diversity and embrace, service and justice for individuals and families from all across societal and other divides. To paraphrase former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, the Church is the

only family institution whose existence and purpose is not primarily for the benefit of its own members.

So, what's the good news in this gospel today? Even, and especially in desperate situations, we can experience a true heartfelt reliance on God and have released in us a powerful resiliency. Faith that finds itself in a desperate situation or in real danger is a faith in which the strength of God's grace can be most real. So, in our need or desperation, often we are more willing to be open to God's grace leading us than we might be otherwise, as Joseph was able to respond to his angelic-induced dream in a time of great danger. The good news in this gospel today is that God's light comes to us most profoundly both *in* the darkness and *out of* the darkness.

"Deep calls to deep", as the 42<sup>nd</sup> Psalm puts it (42:7). God's depth calls to us in our depths. And this is a holy meeting. We come to God and God comes to us at that sacred intersection where we can't think or will our way out, study or rationalize our way out, eat or drink or drug or work our own way out. This is the path of not knowing just where we're going, but trusting that God is leading us, is going before us, is with us, in some way. This is the path into and out of Egypt. And all of us take it, one way or another. But we do not need to go it alone.

As we go forth, let us not forget that each of us is born of God as well as of our earthly parents. Each of us has dual citizenship, here on earth and in the Kingdom of God. Each of us has dual parentage with our earthly and our heavenly Father/Mother. And each of us has dual membership in our church family and in the larger often-divided human family that is so desperately in need of the community of love and care and mutual support we see in the relationship of Joseph, Mary and Jesus, the Holy Family.

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<sup>i</sup> But if we want to apply the events of that far away time to our lives today, we have to understand further some of their realities. We have to realize that life really was desperate even for this most holy family. Mary really had to make an enormous leap in faith to believe the awesome message of the angel Gabriel. Joseph really had to trust God, and Mary, against all logic, to give that family a human father and husband. Both parents had to brave the journey to Bethlehem, the birth in a stable, the flight into Egypt, and the long trek back. These parents also had to put up with a child so dauntingly precocious that when lost at the age of 12 and then found safe in the Temple after an anxious two-day search, their son Jesus tells them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house? [Luke 2:49]" And then later, Mary had to endure her adult son's abrupt dismissal when she and other members of her family tried to visit him, possibly with an agenda to tell him to cool it and come home. "Who is my mother and who are my brothers? [Matthew 12:48]," Jesus replies. And finally, as we fast forward to the scene of Jesus enduring the torture of the cross right before his mother's eyes, he summons the selflessness to worry about his mother and entrusts her to the care of his beloved disciple John [John 19:27].

Details of the early start, and also the later life, of this holy family send real messages about love, trust and faith. It's easy to feel the often-depicted love of mother and Christ child. It is harder to imagine Joseph's instant, unquestioning, self-denying trust and faith when God called him to obey. It's harder still to understand the tough love Jesus showed at the age of twelve in the Temple after his parents finally found him; and then, as an adult, when he had to turn away family

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members who tried to visit him (probably with an agenda to get him to cool it, come home and play it safe). He knew he could not love his earthly family well if he did not love his heavenly Father more. And, at the last, on the cross, Jesus' heart-wrenching reaching out to his mother overwhelms us as the epitome of love.

<sup>ii</sup> Frederick Buechner, Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 46.

<sup>iii</sup> William Sloane Coffin, A Passion for the Possible (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 6.

Also, "No man is an island," as John Donne put it. That is well worth remembering. "But," as Buechner points out,

"families have a way of being islands notwithstanding—the Flanagans as distinct from the Schwartzes and the Schwartzes never to be confused with the Charbonneaus... You think of a row of houses on a street. The same drama is going on in all of them—the Human Drama—but in each of them a unique drama is also going on. Though the... walls are so thin you can hear a baby's cry through them, they are solid enough to keep out the world. If in the Schwartzes house the baby dies—or grows up and gets married by the... roses in the backyard—all the other families on the street rally round and do what they can. But it is in the Schwartzes house alone that what happens happens fully. With the best will in the world, nobody on the outside can know the richness and mystery of it, the foreshadowings of it deep in the past, the reverberations of it far in the future. With the best will in the world, nobody on the inside can make it known." - Buechner, *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Buechner goes on to say,

"It's not so much that things happen in a family as it is that the family is the things that happen in it. The family is continually becoming what becomes of it. It is every christening and every commencement, every falling in love, every fight, every departure and return. It is the moment at breakfast when for no apparent reason somebody gets up and leaves the table. It is the sound of the phone ringing in the middle of the night or the lying awake hours waiting for it to ring." - *Ibid.*, p. 46.

And finally, Buechner points out both the fragility but also the powerful strength of family ties:

"a family is a web so delicately woven that it takes almost nothing to set the whole thing shuddering or even to tear it to pieces. Yet the thread it's woven of is as strong as anything on earth... Even when the twenty-year-old daughter runs out and never comes back, she can hear the... [family's] voices... as she is going to sleep a thousand miles away, and every year when the... birthdays and deathdays come by, she marks each of them as surely as she marks that the sun has gone under a cloud or the moon risen. It is within the fragile yet formidable walls of your own family that you learn, or do not learn, what the phrase Human Family means." - *Ibid.*, p. 47.