

“Run, Joseph, Run”

Advent 2023 – part 6

Matthew 2:13-23

[1-title slide] prayer

[2-runner] I have done a lot of running in my life. I ran on my high school cross-country and track teams. I like taking the dog for a run, especially on hiking trails. My affinity for running started when I was about four years old, and I ran away from home for about half an hour. Eventually my mom’s friend found me and brought me back.

[3-Girl, train tracks] Running as a sport is fun. Running away, especially because of fears and threats, not so much. Let me start this message by asking you, when you have wanted to run away? What were you facing? (White board)

Fear of the unknown is very strong. So is fear of danger. My worldview changed dramatically when I lived in Germany for a year. There were times when I felt scared, though thankfully not often. I didn’t really have a place to run to. As a foreigner, an immigrant, if you will, I wondered if anyone cared about me. In fact, the church in Magdeburg, where I eventually met my wife, was a major influence in my life, because of the comfort, care, and friendship that congregation provided me.

[4-Joseph and Mary] That’s when I was still single. Imagine if your family was in danger. What would you do to keep your family safe? Some of us may have an easier time than others relating to Joseph the father of Jesus and this story in Matthew 2.

If you are into thrillers, this short passage of scripture sounds like a good mini-series. It’s full of conspiracies, mysterious strangers, killers, corruption, and people in power out to get the innocent. There are dramatic, last-second escapes, foreign intrigue, and even miraculous dreams. It’s like they should make a movie out of it...Oh, wait, they did!

[5-Joseph dreams] I imagine, after the wise men left, Joseph had just begun thinking some normalcy might come to his family. I can see him wondering, maybe smiling, as he lays his head down and falls asleep. Unfortunately, he was wrong. An angel spoke to him in a dream, saying, “Get up, immediately. Take

your family to Egypt. King Herod will try to kill the boy, and probably you and his mother as well. Stay in Egypt until I tell you the coast is clear.”

What a weird dream! Yet Joseph knew it was real. He woke up immediately, packed his belongings, and took Mary and Jesus to Egypt. It was a rough journey, but they stayed as they were told.

[6-King Herod] It took a while, but eventually Herod realized he had been duped. In a rage, he ordered his soldiers to go into Bethlehem and assassinate all the baby boys 2 years old and younger. Joseph, Mary and Jesus stayed hidden in Egypt, wondering when they would be able to return home. After all, the angel had promised “until I tell you.”

Herod died, and the angel came to Joseph again in a dream, as promised. “Get up again. Go back home. It’s safe now.”

[7-Family returns to Nazareth] Joseph clearly thought it wasn’t safe enough, not in Judea, in Bethlehem. Joseph learned Herod’s son was ruling. He had another dream-warning, so he chose an out of the way place to live, in Nazareth, probably Mary’s hometown.

What a way to start your marriage! We talked about the craziness of the Christmas story, as Luke tells it. Angels, shepherds, a census, no room in the inn. While some of the details between the two narratives are hard to reconcile, both authors are clear: bringing Jesus into the world was anything but easy.

[8-Joseph] How incredible was Joseph in all of this? Matthew 1:19 states that Joseph was “a righteous man.” Surely he wrestled with his role as a surrogate father to Jesus. He was responsible for three unwanted trips: to Bethlehem for the census while Mary was pregnant, to Egypt to escape Herod, and the return to Nazareth. Imagine if you had to experience that much upheaval, strange dreams and instructions, kings, threats, and unexpected visitors. Scripture says that Joseph was a just and good man. I also submit to you that he was brave, resourceful, and strong.

This passage in Matthew doesn’t give us much of a timeline. There is a lot of uncertainty of when these things actually happened, and how old Jesus was. Possibly up to two years, apparently. How would you like to take your toddler 40 miles through the desert country? That’s not my idea of a great road trip.

[9-carpenter] One thing that helped Joseph immensely to care for Mary and Jesus was his chosen profession. Lots of English Bible translations say he was a carpenter, but the actual word is tekton, from which we get the word architect. Joseph could have been skilled in many different types of crafts, including woodwork and masonry. He could carve, chisel, and shape many building materials, like a modern-day contractor. He had a good job for working anywhere. And judging by his response to move his family at least twice, Joseph was willing to work anywhere.

[10-fleeing to Egypt] I wonder why this story is included in the Bible. It's not easy to explain or draw conclusions from. On one hand, you could talk about God's protection of the Holy Family. But then, how do you make sense of the horrible murders of the young boys in Bethlehem that couldn't escape? You could say, "It's about listening to your dreams." But I've had lots of dreams that were not from God and I'm glad I didn't follow.

There is one conclusion I do draw from this passage, and it's why I read that short book to the children earlier. In plain terms, Jesus was at one time a refugee. He was forced to leave his home country and live as an exile. It is no coincidence that Matthew quotes from Hosea with the line, "Out of Egypt I called my son." Hosea is a book about God's love of his people, even when they are unfaithful. God was calling his people out of exile, out of their runaway situation, and calling them back to faithfulness. Just like God called the slaves out of Egypt with Moses. The fact is, Jesus understands what it is like to have to trust God completely when the situation is out of control and dangerous, strange and foreign. Jesus can say, "I get you."

[11-modern refugees] On the other hand, perhaps we should reexamine our reaction to exiles. Refugees are all over the news in our modern world. In the US, we tend to look at the situation in abstract terms, wanting to pin the blame on someone. We think in terms of "whose fault is it?" Colonialism, immigration policies, partisan politics, border control. It's not often we try to walk a mile in their shoes.

If Joseph had blamed King Herod's irrational succession policies for their dire situation, he would have been correct, but not very helpful. Instead, Joseph chose obedience to God. Like the Joseph of the Old Testament, Joseph, the

husband of Mary, listened to the dreams God gave him. He took his family to Egypt, and made the best of the situation.

[12-Gaza, war] I can't help but notice that Joseph and his family would have traveled right through the modern-day Gaza Strip, not once, but twice, just like refugees from Gaza are trying to enter Egypt today. Perhaps this story is here to teach us to have compassion on those people who have no choice, and who are going to places where they wonder, “Will my family be safe?” How will we respond?

[13-young Jesus] Imagine Jesus as a young boy, growing up in the reasonably safe, small village of Nazareth. Imagine, as he is working in his father's shop, Jesus comes across a small item with Egyptian writing on it. Maybe a bowl or piece of pottery. Jesus looks at his father, Joseph, and asks, “Where did this come from? It's not one of ours.” I see Jesus and Joseph sitting down and talking about why they went to Egypt. Joseph explains the terrible circumstances that forced them to flee. Joseph talks about the Hebrews they met in the local synagogue, their neighbors who welcomed them. Perhaps the two of them even visit the graves of the baby boys whom Herod killed. Just think, for a moment, what might that have meant to Jesus as he grew up.

[14-Despair] Maybe this story is here for us to remember that there are many today who fear for their lives. There are refugees, those escaping human trafficking and domestic abuse. There are others whose situation might not even be that dangerous, but they are new to us, looking for a new start, wanting someone to offer them compassion. What do we offer them? I'm not saying it is easy. Compassion for others who are different from us takes extra time, resources, patience and energy. It also takes the realization that none of us have it all together, either.

[15-title slide] So this is my prayer, and I hope it is yours, too. I pray that we would listen to God, both when God calls us into new situation, and when God calls us to care for others who are new. I pray we would also listen to God when we are warned that something isn't right, something may harm us, or even something that is against the will of God, and we would take whatever action possible to correct it. To be clear, this requires careful discernment! It does not

mean believing every dream, but maybe listening more to our dreams would do us some good.

Most of all, I hope that each one of us would be more like Joseph. That we would be flexible, using our gifts to serve others, whatever they may be. I pray that we will be willing to sacrifice our own desires and comfort for the sake of someone else. And I pray that we will see the sacrifices and hardships that Jesus suffered, because he was human as well as divine, and we will know that Jesus, more than anyone else, understands when we are weary, anxious and unsure, and he is there to provide us a way out.

Let us pray.

Memory Verse: Psalm 139:3

“You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.”

Reflection questions

1. What emotions do you imagine the holy family felt during their escape to Egypt? What do you think helped them cope?
2. Why do you think Joseph obeyed the angel’s orders immediately? What had prepared him to respond with such speed?
3. Following the excitement and joy of Christmas, in what ways can we continue to be obedient to God to persevere through the trials and routines that replace the ribbons and décor of the holidays?¹
4. Sometimes our journeys seem to take detours or side trips. What spiritual practices and what can our church do to help provide encouragement for this part of our journey?²
5. Into what “unknown country” is God calling you in the new year?

¹ from umcdiscipleship.org

² Ibid.