

## Out of Egypt

Matthew 2:13-23

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AUDIO - <http://fbcjc.buzzsprout.com/7678/139395>

How many of you still have your Christmas decorations up? How many of you, like me, can't quite get the same energy to put them away because you want to linger in the glow of Christmas a little bit longer? I love the lights, the candles, the music - all the trappings that bring so much beauty to this season! Keith has spoiled me this year. Most days he is up before I am and turns on all the lights on all the trees (yes, we have 3 trees!) and also lights the fireplace and puts the coffee on, so when I get up it's all warm and cozy and beautiful for enjoying! I love it! I don't want that to go away!

But it does go away, doesn't it? We can't live in the glow of anticipation and celebration forever. The cold, wintry days that follow are short and it will be awhile before we begin to notice the lengthening of days. This time of year, with its scarcity of sunlight affects many of us enough that there is an official name for the kind of depression and sadness that accompanies it. Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD, it is appropriately named. Vitamin D3 and even time under a sunlight help.

Our text for this morning lets us peek into the world that Jesus was born into. Mary and Joseph had hardly welcomed him safely into this world when they learned that their plans were going to be changing and life would be quite different than they had thought. They would soon be finding out what it's like to be immigrants, aliens in a foreign land.

You remember what was happening as our story begins? The astronomers, or wise guys or scholars, from the East, following the star, had been stopped on their journey to find Jesus, by King Herod. Herod tried to trick them by asking them to report back after they found the baby so that he, Herod, might go worship him, too! And that's where the story picks up this morning in Matthew 2. God's angels were busy looking out for this tiny baby and his sweet family!

Let's see what it says:

(Read text)

Joy Carol Wallis reminds us that Jesus didn't enter a world of "**sparkly Christmas cards or a world of warm spiritual sentiment. Jesus entered a world of real pain, of serious dysfunction, a world of brokenness and political oppression. Herod represents the dark side of the good news.**" This is a stark reminder that we, too, cannot stay in that warm fuzzy Advent world too long before we also have to face the starkness and reality of life.

Whatever those issues are that yank us back into reality - paying off all the charges we made for Christmas gifts; relationships that seemed even more difficult to deal with over the holidays;

beginnings and endings that we dreaded; hopes we had that are becoming increasingly unreachable - these are just a few of the things that we may be facing now.

I can't quite remember how old I was when I first became aware of these verses about Herod's temper tantrum and how he reacted to the Wise men's no-show, but it was a rude awakening for me! Could that possibly be part of the Christmas story? The killing of babies? The sounds of weeping mothers lamenting for their children. Not a pretty picture. It's disturbing. The image of children being slaughtered is offensive. Do we have to even talk about it?

That's one thing about the Bible - there's no glossing over or covering up of all the awful stuff that happened. The dark days that followed Jesus' birth cannot be ignored. Besides the children that were slaughtered, between Herod and his son, Archelaus over 5000 people were crucified during their reign! No wonder Joseph and Mary settled in Nazareth putting some distance between them and the Judean ruler! God provided a way for them to be protected from the horrible onslaught. Foreigners and strangers kept this family safe. God's angels spoke to and were heard by people who were not of the chosen Jewish nation. Perhaps even some who worshipped other gods, yet they were obedient to the instructions of God's angels. Sometimes people on the outside, on the margins seem to get a special hearing from God, but not only that, they often see and hear the possibilities beyond what others see.

Difficult day and hard times often lead to amazing things! Leonard Cohen's famous quote says: **"There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."** Sometimes I wonder what messages God might be trying to convey to me through unlikely people, perhaps someone who does not follow Christ, but through whom God is working? What cracks in our souls is God seeking to shine the light through in order to wake us up, get us moving and transform us?

Dark days and sleepless nights may be transforming us in ways we could never have imagined! I'm not saying that to minimize the pain! Nor do I believe that God somehow causes that pain to happen in order to shape us toward God. Not at all. But God does allow it, aware of how we may be shaped for the better for having experienced it. Nature shows us that model over and over again - butterflies that would never learn how to fly without the struggle to get out of that cocoon; even the birth of our precious babes, who struggle so hard to leave that warm, comfortable environment to come out to a cold, harsh world! Truly miraculous, isn't it?!

This last Sunday of the year seems a fitting time to linger awhile thinking about endings and beginnings. As one who is about to "retire" in just a couple of days, it is something I've been pondering the past few months. As I realized retirement was right around the corner these past few years, I've been paying attention to others who have retired before me. I've done some reading about people who have gone on to accomplish much after they were retired and up in years. I've noticed that some folks retire well and others not so much! I've received quite a bit of advice! Here are some of my observations of retirees I have known:

- 1) Those who seem to complain and criticize others the most seem to be the least happy in their own life. I suspect that retirement hasn't been all they thought it would be and they are a little miserable and transfer that as criticism about others.

- 2) Those who have purpose and meaning in their life, seem to have better health and a better outlook on life.
- 3) That you can retire too early and soon find that having nothing to do is not as much fun as it seemed like it would be.
- 4) That God's people never really retire from ministry and serving. I can't find any verses in the Bible that say when you get to a certain age you can sit back and be a balcony Christian.
- 5) That those who are lifelong learners enjoy life the most. It's almost impossible to continue educating oneself and sit back and idly watch life go by - at the same time!

As the pages of the new calendar flip over, what changes will show up that weren't scheduled? What doors will we dare to open? What discoveries are just waiting for us to uncover? I like this quote from poet Louise Smith: "**You can't reach for anything new if your hands are full of yesterday's junk.**" (Read again)

So what can we do with yesterday's junk? Doyle's sermon series on hoarding gave us much to think about as we consider all our possessions, our unwillingness to pare down, clean out and give up so that we might live more simply and more dependent upon God. We had to search our hearts and try to be honest about how we depend on our stuff and acquiring more stuff to make us feel good and valuable.

But we also carry around a lot of junk in our heads and hearts - stuff that can weigh us down and beg for our attention when we need to move forward. Old hurts and resentment. Guilt for things we've done or left undone that eat away at us. Anger over perceived insults and injury. We can't just turn those things off. But we can do something positive about them. Reflection on what good might have come out of those issues can help us re-focus on dealing with them in more healthy ways. And then let them go...

Mary and Joseph had their plans changed several times! They never planned Mary's embarrassing and inconvenient pregnancy. They never dreamed they would be in that awkward and scandalous situation. They never dreamed that they would be aliens and immigrants for awhile after Jesus' birth! But they placed their faith and hope in a God who was bigger than they were. Each time God spoke through an angel they paid attention and made the changes asked of them. Their obedience brought them safety despite dangerous circumstances. God's timing was perfect. It always is.

I suspect those wise men and shepherds who traveled from to worship the baby, returned home and were never the same again. Once you meet Jesus, life is never the same again. Following Jesus won't make our lives any more comfortable or easy. In fact, the closer our walk with Jesus is, the more uncomfortable we will become with this world and its values, its ways or measuring success. The lenses through which we see the world will change and we will begin to notice that the things that used to disturb us are dimming as we become more aware of the things that disturb God - the things Jesus talked about again and again. The things Jesus lived out in his time in the flesh on this earth.

Jesus does not make my life more comfortable or any easier. Jesus doesn't help me fit in or succeed. As we grow in our faith and mature as followers of Christ we find the old, simple pat

answers we used to have to life's questions, are not as simple anymore. We find that we must learn to love ourselves well before we can love others well, too, and follow the Golden Rule - even when it means loving and forgiving those who have hurt, mistreated or disappointed us. We won't turn into wimpy doormats, but will make a choice to forgive, we will make a choice to turn the other cheek - from strength, not weakness. **It will be a conscious choice understanding that harboring hatred and resentment toward another will harm oneself more than it will the other person.**

And so we come through Christmas days of warmth and celebration to the stark reality of a new year filled with the unknown. Where is God now? Why, God is right here, available and ready to journey with us into the new year. If we listen closely and pay attention, there are exciting possibilities ahead. We are more than a people saved to have an eternal life in heaven with God and to rest on our laurels. We are just beginning our Spirit-led journey, listening for the still, small voice to be our guide, anticipating sharing this journey with other pilgrims also on the journey because we need one another. When our faith is weak, they will bolster us up - as we will for them when they are weak. When we trip and fall, they will help us up, knowing that we will do the same for them. We will weep together and celebrate together understanding God's Spirit is also in the middle of it all with us. Thanks be to God.

Will you pray with me?

Almighty, Gracious and Holy God, how can we find the words to thank you for bringing us this far? For walking with us every step of the way? For lifting us up when we think we can go no farther. For giving us the gift of your mercy and grace and forgiveness for the many, many times we fail you? For loving us in spite of ourselves? Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

Amen.