

CHRISTMAS: A TIME FOR SHARING THE GOOD NEWS OF JOY

First Sunday after Christmas

[The Holy Family]

December 30, 2007

Isaiah 63:7-9

Psalm 148

Hebrews 2:10-18

Matthew 2:13-23

Out of Egypt

Matthew remembers well the place of Egypt in the story of God. It was the classic land of refuge for those fleeing disaster in Palestine. It was the land of food for Jacob's sons, saved from famine by their brother, Joseph, the dreamer turned protector of Egypt (Genesis 42-48). A series of refugees had been harbored there: Jeroboam (an official in King Solomon's court and first king of the divided kingdom of Israel, 975-954 B.C.E., 1 Kings 11:40), the prophet Uriah (who sought to escape from King Jehoiakim, c. 609 B.C.E., Jeremiah 26:20-23), the high priest Onias IV (who fled to Egypt to escape from Antiochus Epiphanes, c. 172 B.C.E., cf. *Josephus*, XII:387). Egypt was a haven, a safe place, a shelter in troubled times.

But Egypt was also the place of tears, of bondage, oppression, and hostility. Wicked Pharaoh killed Israel's children there. Matthew remembered these things. He also remembered the rescued child Moses, and the deliverance from Egypt, the years of wilderness wandering, and the nation's rebuilding in the land of promise. So now that Matthew has seen how Jesus' earthly history has unfolded, he can find the signs of preparation for it all over Israel's history.

"Out of Egypt have I called my son," Matthew read in Hosea 11:1. So what else is new? Neither human racism, nor slavery, nor decrees of infanticide, nor tyrannical deceit will cancel the design of God, whether then or now. Out of Egypt once again comes rebirth and redemption.

Tears are also remembered, the deeds of wicked rulers recalled. Pain resides in these memories. Rachel wept for her children, inconsolably, the prophet Jeremiah said (31:15), referring to the wife of the patriarch Jacob and mother of Joseph of Egypt. Matthew remembers that Bethlehem is her territory now: she was buried near there (Genesis 35:19, 48:7). Israel's mother is weeping again.

But kings depart, and God's plan continues. The new Joseph, protector of the newborn deliverer and his mother, learns in Egypt that it is time to return, that Nazareth is where the new rebirth and redemption will unfold. Matthew concludes his prologue with the

words “He will be called a Nazorean.” This title offers more than a hometown, and Matthew sees echoes of Israel’s history all over it. Samson and Samuel were “Nazirites,” select holy ones set aside for God’s service from their mother’s womb. And old Isaiah had spoken of the blossom from the Davidic root (11:1), Jesse’s branch, in Hebrew the *neser*. That branch is come, the holy one of Israel, the Nazorean.

Egypt, in all your ambiguity, between shelter and threat, haven and tears, you have a role in God’s unraveling plan. But Egypt, you are us all, offering both help and obstacle, every day saint and sinner, both implement and impediment to redemption. Egypt, oh Egypt, you are us.

This week’s Reflection was prepared by the Rev. Dr. Richard L. Jeske, who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Director of Ecumenical and Interchurch Relations.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies around the world: With thanks to God for the special Scripture outreach programs that are taking place in orphanages, schools, homes for the elderly and disabled, hospitals, and other institutions, and with prayers that the story of Jesus’ birth will bring joy and hope to all who hear it.

Activity Corner: “Refugee Collage”

Supplies needed: News magazines, newspapers, scissors, glue or paste, construction paper or one sheet of poster board.

The Gospel text calls our attention to the plight of the world’s refugees. Scan news magazines and newspapers for pictures of refugees. Cut out the pictures and paste them onto a sheet of poster board (or individuals may make their own collages by pasting the pictures onto sheets of 8-1/2 x 11 construction paper). Encourage a discussion about why the people are fleeing, where they are going, what possessions they are taking with them, what they might be thinking and feeling, etc. Discuss what is being done to help refugees. Talk about what items you and other members of your household would take if forced to leave home. What would you miss the most? Reflect on the challenges Mary and Joseph had to face when they had to leave their home and travel to another place. Conclude your discussion time by asking a family member to read Isaiah 63:7-9. At the end of the reading, invite all family members to respond together, “THANK YOU, GOD, FOR YOUR EVERLASTING LOVE AND MERCY. AMEN.”