

January 5, 2020
The Second Sunday after Christmas
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Jeremiah 31:7-14
Psalm 84
Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a
Matthew 2:1-23

That unusually long gospel reading was the entirety of Matthew, chapter 2. It was longer than it was supposed to be, because I thought we should hear the whole story, and so I broke “the rules” of the lectionary. Remember, a lectionary designates the readings for worship. There are different lectionaries; the Revised Common Lectionary or RCL is used by most mainline Protestants. The Episcopal Church uses the RCL, modifying it slightly and adding feast days otherwise absent.

For today, the lectionary recommends reading only the parts of Matthew about the Holy Family fleeing to and returning from Egypt. It offers as an option the part directly involving the wise men, which it also appoints for the Feast of the Epiphany, which is tomorrow. In either case, it would have had us skip the three verses about the infuriated Herod and those lamenting women. Those three verses show up in the reading appointed for the largely overlooked Feast of the Holy Innocents, which is observed on December 28.

If that explanation was a little confusing, that's partly because the lectionary is confusing, and *that's* partly because the liturgical calendar forces it to be. The lectionary must do what it must do, and that's sometimes problematic. If one reads only the Sunday gospel lessons and only in the order appointed, the gospels get mixed up, events get reordered, and details get skipped.

Matthew doesn't give us a lot of details about Jesus' birth, but we might at least pay close attention to what he does say. Of course, Luke gives us an altogether different set of details. We should listen to it all with at least a couple of things in mind. First, the Hebrew prophetic tradition necessitated that the messiah be born in Bethlehem. And second Jesus was a historical figure who almost certainly grew up in Nazareth. Unlike us, people in first-century Palestine weren't geographically mobile, but somehow Jesus had to relocate from Bethlehem to Nazareth. Matthew and Luke accomplish that in two very different and incongruent ways. As they do so, they say slightly different things about the person and messiahship of Jesus.

Remember, each of the four canonical gospels—along with the many non-canonical gospels—tells the story of Jesus in its own way. In doing so, they say different things about the person and messiahship of Jesus. The four gospel writers were putting down on paper—or, more correctly, on papyrus—the stories that were being told in their communities. That's to say that each community of Christ followers said different things about the person and messiahship of Jesus. Comparing and contrasting them need not compromise our recognition of both the humanity and the divinity of Jesus. Rather, it may help us plumb the depths of both his humanity and his divinity. And that's how we as Christians try to understand what God is doing in the world.

For many centuries, people weren't allowed to read the Bible, precisely because they might get their own ideas about what it says. Access to the Bible is one of the things brought to you by the Protestant Reformation. It's actually an awesome privilege and perhaps an even more awesome responsibility: we read so that we can tell. Like those gospel writers, each of us needs to be able to tell the story of Jesus, which is how we Christians tell the story of God. Now, here's the dangerous part: each of us will tell the story in our own way. When it comes to storytelling, more evangelical Christian traditions take the blue ribbon over mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions. But we do better in another area: trust, trust that you can and will figure it out for yourself, without threats or coercion. It's an awesome privilege and an even more awesome responsibility.

Speaking of blue ribbons, there are a lot of famous evangelicals, but not many famous Episcopalians. Michael Curry, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, had a brief shining moment in the sun in 2018, after preaching at the British royal wedding. But the current most-famous-Episcopalian is likely to be presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg. His position as a Democrat who talks about faith makes him a unique candidate and a unique target.

Maybe you noticed the brief dustup over his Christmas Day tweet. He tweeted this: "Today I join millions around the world in celebrating the arrival of divinity on earth, who came into this world not in riches but in poverty, not as a citizen but as a refugee." I saw the news headline and then read the tweet; it seemed so innocuous to me that I had to continue reading to learn what the *kafuffle* was about. It was about the words *poor* and *refugee*. Protestant mainliners seemed to take these words in stride, but ugliness ensued from some quarters. One pastor tweeted a reply calling Pete's post a load of a four-letter word I wouldn't use in a tweet or from this pulpit.¹

Was Jesus poor? I have to admit some gospel fuzziness on this. Luke's gospel is the one most concerned with poverty and the overturning of the social order. I can't say that it specifically characterizes Jesus as poor, but it does infer that Jesus is a socioeconomic outsider.

Was Jesus a refugee? Merriam-Webster defines the word *refugee* as "one that flees," especially, "a person who flees to a foreign country or power to escape danger or persecution."² Some tweet-responders argued against refugee status for Jesus, because Egypt was also part of the Roman Empire. I would counter that Rome afforded its local governors a lot of leeway. And besides, Matthew's intention seems quite clear. I will concede one point: Jesus isn't *born* a refugee, but he becomes one soon thereafter. Joseph and Mary seek asylum in order to protect their child, Jesus.

In other words, the Holy Family journeys to Egypt for the same reason that many people come to the U.S. southern border. Therein lies the rub: Buttigieg's Christmas Day tweet was controversial because of current U.S. immigration policy. In protest of current U.S. immigration policy, some Episcopal churches have taken their nativity-scene Mary, Joseph, and Jesus and placed them in chain-link cages; some display Jesus caged separately from his parents. Maybe this is something worth arguing over. Maybe the gospel gets the most traction exactly where it is the most controversial.

Admittedly, there is actually no evidence that the nativity portion of the Gospel of Matthew is historically accurate. This is a better argument against the refugee Jesus, but one that Biblical literalists will not pursue. I don't want to pursue it, either. Matthew wrote the story as he understood it; he said things that would have brought meaning to his community. For his people, those words were true. The story rang true then, and it rings true today. I see it this way: everything I know and understand about Jesus tells me that if he was here today, he would be with poor refugees, so that's where I should be, too. It's as simple as that. Perhaps we should recognize the Feast of the Holy Innocents. Its Collect of the Day says this: "... Receive, we pray, into the arms of your mercy all innocent victims; and by your great might frustrate the designs of evil tyrants and establish your rule of justice, love, and peace"³

One of the beauties of the Anglican tradition is its emphasis on the importance of the incarnation. The blessing that I am going to use at the end of this service is one appointed for Christmas. It says that "Christ ... by his Incarnation gathered into one things earthly and heavenly."⁴ It can never be separated. At Christmas, we recognize and celebrate the birth of divinity into the world, a miracle that did not stop with Jesus. Every person carries the spark of the divine into a landscape of holiness. Hear the story of Jesus, and make it your own. Listen to the divine speaking within you, and then go where it leads, as wisdom follows the light.

Notes

¹ For a story about the tweet and its response, see Eugene Scott, "Backlash to Pete Buttigieg's Christmas Tweet and the Religious Divide it Exposes," *The Washington Post* online, December 26, 2019, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/12/26/backlash-pete-buttigieg-christmas-tweet-religious-divide-it-exposes/> (accessed January 5, 2019).

¹ *The 1979 Book of Common*

² "refugee," *Merriam-Webster* online, available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/refugee> (accessed January 5, 2019).

³ *The 1979 Book of Common Prayer*, 238.

⁴ *The 2018 Book of Occasional Services*, 9.