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Ardmore, Pennsylvania
The Second Sunday after Christmas
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Year A

Jeremiah 31:7-14
Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a
Matthew 2:13-15,19-23
Psalm 84:1-8

God speaks, God saves

In the early Church, before the Middle Ages or so, churches dealt with newcomers in a slightly different way than we do today. Back then, catechumens, before their baptisms, would come to services of worship, but only stay for the first half of it, what we call “the liturgy of the word.” They would hear the scriptures, exhortation and admonishment, the sermon. But the Eucharist was reserved for the grown-ups in the faith, those who had been baptized and been through preparation and formation. So after the liturgy of the word, the catechumens, the newcomers, would leave and the baptized would partake of the heavenly banquet, the Lord’s Supper.

It occurs to me that we do something almost the opposite of that today. First, we invite people to be baptized, incorporating them into the Eucharistic community, and only then, over the course of time, do they really hear the admonishment and exhortation about what it means to be part of the faith, a lifelong formation of growing into the image of Christ. Before then, we mostly talk about the way of love and that kind of thing.

You can see this dynamic in a functional way in our celebrations of Christmas. The big holiday for us, when even nominal Christians at least give lip service to attending church, is Christmas Eve; for this parish, the four o’clock service on Christmas Eve is our most attended service of the year. And there we hear the (truly) lovely story about the birth of our savior, the kids gather round; it feels good. Families get together. We sing about peace on earth.

This is all to the good and I wouldn’t want to do anything differently; there is a place for untrammelled joy in our lives. Taking a break from the upheaval of worldly events and the stresses of everyday life is good. Merry Christmas, I say. Joy to the world, the Lord has come.

However, we can also note that the Church, in its tradition, doesn’t limit itself to celebrating the feel-good nature of the Twelve Days of Christmas. On December 26th, mere moments after celebrating the Nativity, with Christmas dinner leftovers still in the refrigerator, the Church has long kept the feast day of St. Stephen.

*Good King Wenceslas looked out
On the feast of Stephen
When the snow lay round about
Deep and crisp and even.*

St. Stephen is primarily remembered as being the first willing martyr for the Christian faith and honored for that reason. The story is recorded for posterity in the book of the Acts of the Apostles (7:54-60); he was explicitly stoned to death for being a Christian.

On the 28th of December, in one of the most disturbing observances in the Church, we remember the Holy Innocents, those children in Judea who were killed by King Herod after the birth of Jesus. Based on what the three wise men said, Herod was anxious that the child born in Bethlehem

would rival him for power. In order to snuff out this potential competition, he had all the male children under two years old killed. We remember them, therefore, as the very first martyrs, only three days after the Nativity, “Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more” (Matthew 2:18). Merry Christmas, indeed.

This was the event that Mary and Joseph and Jesus avoided in their escape to Egypt, which was our Gospel reading today. Before the slaughter of the holy innocents, but after it became clear that King Herod had evil intent for Jesus, an angel appeared to Joseph and told him to go to Egypt. That is where the Holy Family stayed until the death of Herod, when it was safe to go back.

Early readers (or listeners) to Matthew’s gospel would have recognized the significance of the travel to, and back from, Egypt. The most significant event in the Old Testament, the event that made the Hebrews who they were and are, was the exodus from Egypt. For Jesus to come “out of Egypt” is for him to be the new Moses, the new Moses who would also, in a perfect way, set his people free. In case there is any question about this, you will note that the name of the first person who took the Hebrews into Egypt was also named Joseph, took them into Egypt so that God could take them out again.

But on a literal level, this is a story about a frightened family, fleeing imminent violence, and seeking shelter in a foreign land. This foreign land is not Palm Springs either; rather, it is the place where the Hebrews had been held captive and almost destroyed, by another evil ruler who also tried to kill male children. But at least for a time, for Mary and Joseph and Jesus, it was safe enough.

The Church, at least, doesn’t look away from the fact that while, as the hymn text by Christina Rossetti says, “love came down at Christmas,” it was immediately confronted by the forces arrayed against love. The light of the world was immediately attacked by the world’s darkness. We know how this life, lived in the way of love, ends: on the cross, falsely convicted, the only innocent man who has ever lived crucified as a criminal. It starts right away. He came unto his own, and his own received him not, honored him not, loved him not. The Holy Family fled to Egypt.

There are two things about our Christian life in the modern world that I want to raise up from this story. The first is how it shows that God speaks, God continues to speak, and God speaks in perhaps unexpected ways.

One of the unique things about St. Matthew’s recounting of the early life of Jesus is the way that Joseph is spoken to, by God, through dreams. Let me say, first, that Sigmund Freud, the inventor of psychoanalysis, wasn’t right about everything. But credit should go where it is due: his recognition of dreams as something significant is fair enough, and, as we see, has scriptural precedent. There are several examples in the Old Testament, particularly, of God speaking through dreams, perhaps the most significant example being a man also named Joseph, son of Jacob, in the book of Genesis. I don’t think that means that every time we have a dream in which we show up to work without pants on that God is speaking to us. (But maybe!) But there is no doubt that in Scripture, God speaks, and that is one of the ways that God speaks.

Perhaps one of the reasons that Scripture records God speaking through dreams is that when we’re asleep it is one of the few times when we stop talking. Maybe God sometimes must wait until we’re asleep to get a word in edgewise. This is instructive for our prayer life. We often think of praying as speaking to God, and that is true. A lot of what we’re doing here is praying and praying usually involves us saying things. That’s not bad; actually, it’s good. When the disciples ask Jesus how to pray, he replies, “*Say* this: Our Father, who art in heaven...” Coming to Jesus with our concerns for ourselves, with our intercessions for the world, with our thanksgiving for everything: it is meet and right.

But these five mentions of God speaking to Joseph in dreams in the gospel of Matthew show us that we should also make sure that we’re listening, too. Listening is hard. It’s hard to listen to people sitting in front of us, much less to listen to the invisible God. But God speaks; this much is clear. To

hear him, we must listen. To some people, God whacks them over the head with what he has to say; think of St. Paul being knocked off his horse and struck blind. But to others, God speaks quietly: think of Elijah and the still, small voice, God speaking in the “sheer silence” (1 Kings 19:11-18). But God has spoken, and God is speaking now, and God will continue to speak. He speaks to his people, and he speaks to others (Egyptians, for example) about his people. Listen.

The second thing this episode shows us is that God saves. That is the meaning of the name Jesus: God saves. When God, through an angelic messenger, comes to Joseph for the first time, God is saving Mary and Jesus (and thus the world). Then he speaks in Joseph’s dreams to save the family first from King Herod, and then from Herod’s successor. This is what God does. He speaks in order to save, all the more reason to listen. Testimonies of this abound. Once, when I was teaching a class, I was trying to talk about divine and human causation—about how God does things in the world—and having much difficulty, when a man interrupted loudly and said, “If God didn’t act in my life, I would be dead.” He wasn’t kidding. He knew his life, he knew his history and experiences and actions, and he knew there were places where God came in and just flat-out saved him. God saves.

It is fair to ask, however, that if God speaks, and God saves, what about St. Stephen? What about the Holy Innocents? After all, God didn’t save them.

This is where our faith in what God has said comes in. God didn’t save Stephen or the Holy Innocents from death; the point of including these stories prominently in the Bible I assume was for the authors to tell their audiences that what happened to the martyrs could very well happen to them. But God promises us that we are saved nonetheless; the death that comes to every person is not the final word, and the King Herods of the world will not be the final victors. For now, for reasons mysterious, God allows the King Herods to reign, and the innocents to die. But, in the fullness of time, God will save supremely and completely. The martyrs, like St. Stephen and the Holy Innocents, are the first among equals in this. Those persecuted and oppressed, even killed, are at the front of the line to be saved and are held in the loving arms of God already.

This is one of the places where Freud wasn’t right. He said that dreams, and all of this talk about God speaking and saving, is about wish fulfillment and suppressed feelings, especially about your mother. (If it’s not one thing, it’s your mother.) Just because something is good, however, doesn’t mean it’s wrong. If it’s good, it is something to celebrate, not something automatically to be skeptical of. That is a matter of seeing things with the eyes of faith, however. It is a matter of seeing the world as a place where God acts to save, where God speaks to us when we stop talking. This is the testimony of Scripture, the eons-long continuous story that reaches from creation itself to the final fulfillment of all things: God speaks and God saves. This is the story of Israel in the Old Testament, and the New Israel in the New Testament. God speaks and God saves. Trust in his saving grace and listen to his saving voice, however it comes.