

# Sermon for Sunday, January 4, 2009

## Second Sunday of After Christmas

By Tim Ljunggren

<b>First Lesson</b>	<b>Jeremiah 31:7-14</b>
<b>Psalm</b>	<b>Psalm 84</b>
<b>Second Lesson</b>	<b>Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a</b>
<b>Gospel</b>	<b>Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23</b>

Most of our society is already done with Christmas; the Christmas tree is already down, the ornaments and decorations neatly packed away until next year—the focus is now on a new year ahead of us and all that goes with it.

Yet, our liturgical calendar demands that we still focus on Christmas, doesn't it? We are still focused on the birth of the child, on the wonder of God with us, on the coming of Emmanuel in our lives. But even when we're able to keep our focus on the manger, we may not fully recognize the reality it represents. It's very easy to romanticize this baby who comes at Christmas. Rather than the chill of night in a barn, we feel a warm, sentimental glow like candlelight.

This morning's gospel lesson jars us. We're torn away from all sentimentality and peaceful feelings and contemplation. We're pulled from angelic voices and suitable romanticized responses. Instead, we hear a story of escape, risk, insecurity, and danger. It takes more than the strength of china crèche figurines or soft-touch greeting card characters to undertake this journey by night, fleeing into the confines of Egypt.

Matthew includes this story in order to connect the birth of Jesus with the stories and the prophecies of the Hebrew scriptures. He draws a parallel of exile with the exile of ancient Israel in Egypt. The story we hear this morning echoes the story of Moses, who was persecuted and in danger when he was a baby because of a wicked king. Moses also was put into hiding in order to save him.

These closely drawn parallels show the readers of Matthew's gospel that in all the details of the story, God's purpose of salvation is being worked out. These allusions remind those readers of the history of Israel, the exile and the exodus in which God acted to save the people. The reminder here is of how God's promises were fulfilled, but it's impossible to retell the story, to remember Moses, without also being clearly reminded that the history was not an easy one. The people of God did not start out in the promised land flowing with milk and honey. It's the story of a long journey which Matthew's audience remembers.

As we listen to the unsettling story of the flight into Egypt, we can also be connected to stories in our own time. Jesus was born into a world of oppression, injustice, and political upheaval. The people into which Jesus was born were not the powerful, comfortable, or secure of the time. From the beginning of his life, Jesus was vulnerable to risks and dangers, serious enough to require Mary and Joseph to be uprooted in order to protect him.

The baby Jesus, carried into Egypt by night, shares the humanity of all of us: those whose lives are threatened by political unrest and upheaval; those who die in places where peace is replaced by conflict; those whose lives are affected by leaders and decisions over which they have no control; those who are imprisoned, silenced, or exiled because of their beliefs; those who are separated from home or family because of race or nationality; those children born into places or nations which will never know peace in their lifetimes; those women and children who run from abuse in their own homes; those runaway children and teenagers exiled into the frightening world of the streets; those whose families are uprooted by economic changes and unemployment; those whose opportunities are limited because of prejudice or misunderstanding; and all of us in whatever ways we are unsettled by anxiety or lack of security.

This is the humanity, the risky, frightening, difficult life in which Jesus comes to share. These are the stories of our time which parallel the story of the flight into Egypt. The coming of the Christ child in our midst does not promise instant comfort and security. Rather, if we celebrate the birth of Jesus, then we celebrate his coming into our human situation will all of its pain and complexity. We may not like being reminded of Jesus' connection and ours to these intense, difficult human stories.

When we're able to find hope, fulfillment, and light, we'll find it even in the unsettling story of the flight into Egypt, in the story of journey that reminds us that Jesus journeys with us in all our humanity.

We'll remember the journey. We'll find hope. We'll celebrate—and we'll understand, far beyond anything we've ever imagined, the wonder of God with us this Christmas season and always.

Amen. ...