

Matthew 2:13-15-23

Happy New Year! 2021 has finally arrived and today is the 10th day of Christmastide! I'd like to invite us into 2021 by thinking of it like travel and relocation. If you have ever traveled and stayed somewhere new for a length of time or perhaps even moved to a different country or culture – you probably experienced culture shock. Culture shock occurs in essentially five stages and they are actually quite similar to the 5 stages of grief. I had an intense case of culture shock when I moved as a young adult to live in Chiang Mai, Thailand as a teacher and missionary intern. The first stage is the honeymoon period – and I remember that feeling well – most of us stay in that phase as tourists- everything in Thailand was amazing and beautiful and fascinating to me – it almost felt like falling in love. The second stage of culture shock is rejection – and I remember hitting that phase hard. I could tell I was in it because absolutely everything about my new city began to upset or frustrate me - why did they drive that way? Why were stores set up in such a backwards way? Why did they have all these ridiculous customs!? I felt all alone and sad- truly isolated and even angry at times. The third stage is the regression phase – this is when one tries to surround oneself only with people and cultural things that are similar to one's own- similar to avoidance and denial. I started wanting to eat only at "American" type restaurants and found myself clinging to the few Westerners that lived in the city. The fourth stage is recovery and acceptance and that was when I began to start to see the good again – I started to feel like maybe things weren't so terrible in Thailand and I even started identifying with the culture and valuing it. Of course, this lead into the fifth and final stage of culture shock – which occurs when one re-enters their old culture or country- its called reverse culture shock. When I returned to the United States a year later I was actually overwhelmed and had a hard time adjusting and re-assimilating to it...but eventually I did.

So why speak of this kind of journey today? Well, on this second Sunday of Christmas as we read the story of the Holy Family's flight into Egypt following the visit of the wisemen, I'd like to consider not only the culture shock inherent in our Gospel story, but to suggest that the pandemic has placed all of us on a

journey of culture shock. We did not move to Egypt like the Holy Family, but we have all moved into a new "normal" during this pandemic and our lives have felt foreign in many ways. Fortunately, the Christmas story and all of Scripture reminds us to see God's hand at work even, or perhaps especially in the turmoil.

Matthew's Gospel describes Joseph's dream as the angel tells him to take his family and flee to Egypt. The reason is that King Herod was told by the wisemen that a king had been born in Bethlehem and they had followed his star to find and pay him homage. Herod, of course, was deeply threatened, he worried that his throne could be overthrown by this newborn king and so Herod orders that all males ages two and younger be killed. This event is known as the Slaughter of the Holy Innocents in our church calendar, which we observe on December 28th every year. And so the Holy Family becomes a refugee family as Jesus' life is under threat and they leave home to hide in Egypt. Scholars believe that there were perhaps 12-20 male children of that young age in the little town of Bethlehem at that time who would have been killed out of Herod's jealousy and hunger for power. In retrospect, historians have suspected Herod of having a personality disorder because his paranoia and jealousy led him to kill, not just these children, but even his own family members who he believed threatened his power. But Jesus and his family escape to Egypt and become refugees in a foreign land until Herod dies and it is safe to return and resettle in Nazareth.

While the Church and our society have often painted the Christmas story with rose colored glasses- as though it were simply a serene and idyllic moment – Scripture offers us a different lens. In it we see that God in Jesus entered our world which was torn by strife and violence on all sides. The people of Israel were divided into factions and their leader and king was hellbent on keeping power at any and all costs. The people paid the price. There was death and trauma for them as well as the wider divisions among the people of Israel caused by Rome's occupation. The gentle and happy story of the babe in the manger quickly gives way to the darkness and violence of death and the urgency to flee to escape it.

Fr. Mark has said that this Christmas is more like the first Christmas in some ways. I agree. Usually Christmas is a time to bask in the sweetness of the story – and it is sweet- but the façade we often create was easier to cling to in times past...and to sing that all is calm, all is bright. But the pandemic has stripped us of this – instead – we know all is not calm and in the church, in our nation, or in the world. We, like the Holy Family, have all had to leave the country we knew in some sense – our normal lives have been turned upside down under the New Normal and loss and trauma of 2020. The Holy Family faced death and the loss of their people as the innocents were slaughtered. Violence reigned and was even urged on by the racial and cultural tensions of their day. There's was a collective trauma, like ours. We have all, no matter our status in life, have been undergoing culture shock. In the early days of the pandemic we saw hints of the first stage as many embraced something like a honeymoon- baking bread and praising the benefits of having more time for oneself and engaging in self or home improvements. But as time went on and COVID spread, our new normals gave way to rejection, perhaps even denial, depression, and anger being played out in many different ways from rioting to renewed calls to armed militias...the second stage. Some are seemingly still in that second stage – perhaps like the bomber in Nashville last week. Others have entered the third stage of culture shock – regression. We witness this in the renewed allegiances of people into a tribalism of sorts within our culture- on the left and the right...the intense need to cling to political and cultural allegiances even when it harms others. We may be preparing to enter the recovery and acceptance stage as we enter the new year and 2021. But I think we do well to note that we are not there yet and we will need to prepare for a reverse culture shock ahead too. At least we know that culture shock has stages that give way to recovery.

So, like the Christmas story, there is much good news in the midst of the turmoil. We, like the Holy Family, do not travel alone in this new land. We have not entered “Egypt” – our new normal- without the guidance, love, and presence of God. The Christmas story is vital and central to Christians because of the Incarnation: the promise that God is here present with us in incredibly tangible ways. In the Incarnation

God comes to us not just as spirit- but in human form as Jesus. And we continue to meet God incarnationally in tangible, physical ways in the bread of Communion, in the water of baptism, in the people in our lives who are God's hands and feet to us in this world. And, like the first Christmas, we see answers to prayers – the angels have come to us- the angels of nurses and doctors and scientists and others who not only care for us but have provided us with a Christmas miracle – the vaccine approved just in time for Christmas -in fact- multiple successful effective vaccines produced in record time that many call miraculous...and this too is incarnational – a tangible means of God's grace in the midst of trauma and loss – a grace and sign of God's presence that brings us hope and lights our way.

God has not abandoned us. We boldly move into 2021 proclaiming this truth. When we reach out to others – to the refugee, the stranger, the hungry, our neighbors and others with tangible shows of support – we too embody God's grace incarnationally. We live into the Christmas story. We participate in the Incarnation. You see, the Bible does not promise us a world free of suffering or loss or pain – instead the Bible promises us that God breaks into our world of suffering and loss and pain to bring God's saving grace and help. In our darkest times – in the midst of our collective culture shock – and the loss, the division, the grief and oppression-- we know this is not the end or sum total of the story. Because...Emmanuel – God is with us. And we hear the voice of angels – and we see God's love piercing through – making a way in the darkness and lighting our path into a new year. God is with us.

Amen.