

Dreams and Obedience

12/30/2007

Matthew 2: 12-23

Carla Shafer

It is not so well known in Bellingham, that Czech families named their firstborn children Joseph or Josephine after St. Joseph, the patron saint of workers. My mom, Josephine Angelyn Kvetensy, did not use her first name, so this interesting cultural habit was lost on my sister and brother and me. Perhaps as a result, we had very little interest in Joseph. But last week during Pastor Mary's sermon, I began to really consider what kind of a man he might have been and what his life was like. Mary's portrayal of Joseph as a man who was looking after and protecting Jesus' mother gave me some new and useful thoughts. Until she put a human face on this part of the Christmas story, I always thought it was crazy to take Mary, the pregnant woman, across country on a donkey. It was another example (for my then young and skeptical self) of how men wrote the Bible stories, only including women just to keep the plot moving. But now on this day before new year's eve, I see Joseph as someone who was able to take new direction and move into the unknown with a confidence. A confidence only known to people who trust and believe in God.

Again this week, the lectionary invites us to look at the experiences of this new family. If anything, the stable would have felt very, very temporary as a nursery. We are seeing the Christ child as a vision of new life and great possibility in very rustic and temporary circumstances. The family must have been looking forward to returning home. The three wise men leave and Joseph has a dream where God tells him to go to Egypt. At best, this was disappointing. But we now learn two important aspects of Joseph's personality: he pays attention to his dreams and he was obedient to God. He had been worried about Mary's safety and now he had his son's safety to worry about. The message here is: **Obedience to God is essential to the fulfillment of God's plans.**

This is a hard one for us. I know that you are all better than I am at being obedient to God. But I remind you that we are Presbyterians (or Christians in the middle class) who have privilege. We are not the downtrodden. We are like Joseph in that we work hard, and we are fairly successful when it comes to meeting basic needs and having a few luxuries. And that makes us willful. It fills us up with our own ideas about what is best not only for ourselves, our family, but also for our church and our communities. I am sure that unlike Joseph (who listened faithfully to God) we are more likely to be influenced by other voices ... voices sitting beside us, in the media or out of the past than we are in seeking to know what God would truly require of us. So sitting in the stable, preparing to go home, we might have tried to second guess God about whether it would have been better to go somewhere other than Egypt. And maybe Joseph did question why he would now have to become a displaced person for the sakes of Mary and Jesus. There is no reason why it would have been easier for him than it would be

for us, but he packed up and together they traveled for about 10 difficult days into Egypt. They became refugees and for a number of years lived as aliens. They were a family beyond borders, without the resources of home or extended family.

I thought I would take a moment here to remind us all that there are nearly 13 million people living in the world as refugees and asylum seekers. Some of them take hope from the fact that not only Mary and Joseph, but also Moses shared and survived some of the disadvantages and fears that they face daily.

If you made a pie chart of refugees around the world today

- one half would be made up equally of people from Africa or Asia
- the other half would be mostly people in the Middle East
- two slivers would be carved out of that half for 600,000 refugees in Europe and the same number from the Americas.

Here are some present day examples of refugees.

In Colombia, tens of thousands of families continue to flee their homes in search of safety. One Colombian family from the Sipì river basin in Chocó told Refugees International, "We do not want to be part of the conflict. We do not take sides, neither for the guerrilla nor the paramilitary groups. Those violent people are fighting for the control over the coca business; if we refuse to get involved then we need to leave our houses. Last January they gave us eight hours to disappear, so they could loot our belongings, kill the animals and take control of our land."

In Southeast Asia, where nearly 600,000 people are displaced, there are displaced Chin people from Burma. There is one settlement in the Malaysian jungle where a group of 300 men live in crude huts with roofs of plastic sheeting. The settlement has been there for seven years and has been burned down four times by the police, but the Chin rebuild it each time. A local charitable organization dug a well, so they have water, and occasionally a mobile health clinic comes to the settlement. In the high, cool, Cameron Highlands, where vegetables and tea are grown, Chin live in warehouses and sheds on plantations, staying out of sight of local authorities.

In the Middle East and North Africa there are nearly 6 million refugees. An Iraqi mother told her story to Refugees International. Every morning at 8:00 am, Suha departs for her job at a small café in Amman, Jordan, leaving her seven-year-old son, Yasir, locked inside of their two-room apartment, hopefully safe, but alone. Suha and her son fled Iraq and came to Jordan with no friends, family, or resources. Suha works illegally, earning only 140 US dollars a month. She struggles to meet their basic needs: "My salary barely pays for our rent and food alone. How can I ever pay to send my son to school?" Private school is unaffordable, and without residency papers, Yasir cannot attend public school. Suha dreams that the day will come when her son can go to school.

Exile is a significant part of the Bible story that is being re-lived across our planet today. Just as God was with Joseph, Mary and Jesus; God (through us) can be present with refugees today, bringing them justice and hope. We can family by family, country by country, supply water, food, and safety. By our obedience, we can bring a future with more peace and less war, as well as the saving grace of Christ to people most in need.

But how do refugees move on. Checking back with the Christmas story in Matthew Chapter 2, verses 19 through 21, we are told that “Herod died and an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.”

Once again the obedient dreamer follows what God directs. Joseph has the confidence of his faith in God, the experience that God has been with them in all things, and he has been looking forward to returning home. He remembers the dream, he remembers past promises made to him (and to the people of Israel) and he moves forward into the unknown.

Today, on the precipice of 2008, this story invites you to do the same thing. As we are moving into the unknown of a new year, these Biblical events reveal to us what God is like, in both his goodness and his power. By repeating these passages over and over, throughout the cycle of the year, we gain the assurance that Joseph, Mary and Jesus gain. With our memory of the Christmas story (and the fact that it was foretold in Isaiah) we will be able to wake up with faith in the new year obedient to God and hopeful as God’s partner in the continuing creation of the new world.

The St. James Session has taken a step toward the future by appointing a few people to sit together and consider the future of St. James Presbyterian Church. They began meeting in the fall, and I understand that it is the hope of the session that this small, earnest group of 6 or 7 people could look at Bellingham and its growth and changes with fresh eyes. It is hoped that they would be consider what we face related to having enough parking and access for everyone to both the first and second floors of this building, while retaining our open and affirming church. It is hoped that the session members and congregation would give them time to study and create some fresh thinking. It is believed that they do not have separate agendas to push forward, but that they are people who are able to look ahead to the opportunities. It is hoped that after they have studied the issues, they will help all of us to look ahead while facing forward, and not walking backwards with our eyes on the past.

Here we can look again to Joseph who was able to be obedient partly because his experience with dreams was consistent and reliable. His past relationship

with God provided the evidence he needed to break with traditions and grow into a loving husband and father. He was able to trust God and assume that where his skills and thinking were inadequate, God would continue to fill in the gaps. When we remember the past, with its story of Christmas and how Joseph followed God obediently; we are able to imagine the future that is in store for us, for all of us together.

In some way, we are refugees from 2007 about to enter the new home of 2008. We can be like Joseph, obedient to God. We can proceed to be part of the world that God has brought into being through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What we make of 2008 will be based on what direction we take when the love of Christ enters our hearts. It will be based on what kind of travelers we turn out to be. Will we be willful people of privilege? Or can we be like Joseph and dream our next steps and choose to walk the path that God has set before us?