



**St. Andrew's By-the-Sea**  
*The Episcopal Church*  
*in Destin, Florida*

“Escape to Egypt”  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Christmas  
January 5, 2025  
Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

**A Homily by The Rev. Jo Popham**

What a blessing to have the Gospel reading according Matthew that chronicles the Holy family's escape to Egypt. After Joseph was warned in a dream to flee Herod's murderous intentions, he took his new family on a rugged trip to Egypt. Throughout my life, from Sunday School on, I have always imagined a tired older father leading a donkey carrying a weary new mother and her baby boy to the wild land on Egypt. But more recently, in my sanctified imagination, I see them differently. There is a lovely figure depicting the Joseph and Mary and Baby Jesus on their trip to Egypt. The same artist designed the figures of the very pregnant Mary and Joseph encouraging the faithful donkey Jack to travel to Bethlehem though Inns here in Destin – through the homes of our parishioners – thankful for Innkeepers who did not turn them away.

Mary's face is as beautiful in the artist's mind's eye in Flight to Egypt as in our figure that circulated the parish during Advent. Mary would have times when she worried about her baby as Jesus grew in knowledge and stature as her son and God's son, but not when he was a wee babe. No, he was safe tucked in her arm on the trip to Egypt.

The flight to Egypt was a natural thing for Jews to take in troubled times before Jesus was born. You see, in the centuries before Christ, troubled Jews often traveled to Egypt when they were persecuted elsewhere. Indeed there were so many Jews who had sought refuge, that every city in Egypt had a colony of Jews. The city of Alexandria had welcomed more than a million Jews. Noted theologian William Barclay said that Mary and Joseph would not have found themselves among strangers at all.<sup>1</sup>

As an aside, Barclay wrote that those who opposed Jesus used his stay in Egypt to debunk his ministry and to attack Christianity even into the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Egypt was known as the land of sorcery and magic, and his opponents claimed that Jesus learned witchcraft there that enabled him to do miracles and deceive people. Even the Talmud says “Ten measures of sorcery descended into the world: Egypt received nine and the rest of the world one.”

Two lovely legends are attributed to the Holy Family’s flight to Egypt:

- 1) On their way to Egypt, they came upon robbers. One of the robber chiefs wanted to murder them and take their meager goods. Another leader among the robbers was Dismas who would not allow them to harm the baby or his parents. When he looked at the face of Jesus he said: “O most blessed of children, if ever there come a time for having mercy on me, then remember me, and forget not this hour.” Legend has it that Jesus and Dismas met again on Calvary where Jesus hung between two thieves, and Dismas received mercy and forgiveness.
- 2) The other is a sweet story meant for children. On their trip to Egypt, Mary and Joseph were so tired that they sought shelter in a cave. It was cold, so cold that there was hoar frost. A little spider saw the baby Jesus and wanted to try to keep him warm, so he did the one thing he could. He spun a web like a curtain across the entrance to the cave. Herod’s soldiers were out seeking children to kill as Herod had ordered when they came upon the cave with the spider’s web by then covered in hoar frost. The captain of the soldiers noted the spider’s web was unbroken and deduced no one had crossed the cave’s opening. And that is why we put tinsel streamers on our Christmas trees.

Matthew used much of the Old Testament as prophetic literature that foretold Jesus as the Messiah. He knew that the only way to convince Jews that Jesus was the Anointed One of God was to prove that Jesus was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, even when the prophecy was never meant to point to the

Messiah at all, as we have at the end of this passage: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” Hosea (11:1) the minor prophet spoke of God delivering the nation of Israel from slavery and from bondage in the land of Egypt –not of Jesus’s flight to Egypt as a baby or his trip back.

When Herod died his large kingdom was divided. He had garnered favor with the Romans and was allowed to take advantage of considerable power. He knew that none of his sons would be allowed that much power, so he divided his kingdom into three parts. He gave Judaea to Archelaus, Galilee to Herod Antipas, the regions beyond Jordan to Philip. Archelaus was a bad king and did not last long. He tried to “out-Herod Herod” by slaughtering 3000 of the most influential people in the country.<sup>2</sup> So Joseph took his new family to Nazareth in Galilee where Herod Antipas reigned. And Jesus grew up in Nazareth. This was no small back-water town. No, from the hills looking to the west Jesus could see the Mediterranean with its ships going “to the ends of the earth,” and looking the other way he could see the road from Damascus to Egypt – the largest caravan route to the world. He might have had visions of centuries before when Joseph was sold into slavery, or of Alexander the Great 300 years before with his legions behind him out to conquer the world. The road to the east he might have imagined smelling the spices and touching the silks loaded into caravans headed out, and the Romans, clanking in their armor, marching out to war. Jesus as a Nazarene was poised to begin his ministry at the gateway to the world.

And then, but for one trip to Jerusalem with his parents when he learned from – and some might say taught – the elders at the synagogue, we have thirty years of silence about Jesus as he grew and was nurtured in Nazareth in Galilee. What happened in three decades as a boy then a teenager and then a man in what must have been a good home? In Cana in Galilee at the wedding feast where Mary encouraged him to change water into wine for the wedding feast, there is no mention of Joseph. It is likely that as a much older earthy father, Joseph died while Jesus was still a young man. As the eldest son, he must have been the male leader

of the household and carpentry shop in Nazareth. As the village craftsman, Jesus likely worked from home to support his mother and the younger brothers and sisters. Yes, the world was calling him, but his first duty was to his home.

We might say to be able to help ordinary people, Jesus first had to learn what it was like to be a working man, what it must have been like to earn a living wage, to save to buy food and clothes, and maybe a little for a small pleasure or even a trip to the Temple, but also to learn how to deal with the dissatisfied customer, as well as, the one who could not pay his debts. Jesus was not born into a cushy protected life, rather he lived an ordinary life.

And Jesus was faithful his everyday life – if the carpentry shop was simply ordinary – he was faithful in a little, then he could be successful in much greater duties. And surely he was master of great things. Had Jesus been born to royalty and never had to earn his way in the world, could he have identified with us? Could he have lived into being the Savior of the world without understanding the ways of the world?

I imagine that our Lord carried out the everyday duties of the world well but also beautifully. May we never regret what we have learned from the ordinary tasks of our common life.

Let us remember that duty makes us do our jobs well, but love make us carry out those duties beautifully.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay on Matthew 2, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/matthew-2.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*