

Jeremiah 31:7-14

The Rev. Dr. Anita Louise Schell-Lambert

Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a

Sunday, January 2, 2011

Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

Christmas 2 Year RCL A

Psalms 84

Emmanuel, Newport, RI

Now after the wise men had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son. AMEN

"Hey Mother Anita, I want to play a Christmas song for you." It was the Tuesday before Christmas 2009 and I was recording my monthly program, "Keys to Community," with Rich Ryder at WBTV in Bennington, VT. Rich was so eager to share it with me, that he cut our program short by 3 minutes so he would have time to play it for me. (Every minute counts on radio). The title of the song? Faith Hill's, "A Baby Changes Everything." Here are the lyrics:

*Teenage girl, much too young
Unprepared for what's to come
A baby changes everything*

*Not a ring
On her hand
All her dreams and all her plans
A baby changes everything (x2)*

*The man she loves she's never touched
How will she keep his trust
A baby changes everything (x2)*

And she cries, oh she cries

She has to leave, go far away

*Heaven knows she can't stay
A baby changes everything*

*She can feel it's coming soon
There's no place, there's no room
A baby changes everything (x2)*

And she cries and she cries O she cries

*Shepherds all gather 'round
Up above the star shines down.*

A baby changes everything

*Choir of Angels say
Glory to the newborn king
A baby changes everything (x2) everything, everything, every day
Hallelujah x4*

*My whole life is turned around
I was lost and now I'm found
A baby changes everything (x2)¹*

“A baby changes everything.” How true is that? For all the babies in our lives – our own, our nieces, and nephews, our godchildren and young friends, the minute a baby comes into the world, your world is turned upside down – never, NEVER to be the same again. If this is true for us, how even more so was this true for Mary and Joseph.

Yes, “A Baby Changes Everything” is the tale of a pregnant teenage girl faced with the uncertainty of her future and coming to terms with the fact that her life is about to change. In the bridge of the song, it is revealed that the teenage girl and baby in question are in fact Mary and Jesus, and the penultimate line, “I was lost and now I'm found,” a

¹ <http://www.justeverything.info/Lyrics/Faith+Hill/A+Baby+Changes+Everything/>, accessed December 29, 2009.

quotation from the hymn Amazing Grace, acknowledging that this baby – this tiny little baby, has turned the singer's, and by extension, all of our lives around. Just how did he do that? As the Gospel for today reveals, the "glory days" of gold and frankincense and myrrh did not last for long.

Today's Gospel is organized around movements between four geographical settings that, taken together, relate a downward spiral for Jesus' apparent career and success this "baby that changes everything" is not following the predictable pattern for a king. Bethlehem is where Jesus is at the start of the lesson (cf. 2:1). It is the "city of David," a place of great importance in Israel's tradition and God's plan. Even Jesus' opponents knew (or learned) that this was precisely the spot where the Messiah should be born (2:3-6). But, from here, where would the "King of the Jews" go next, to Jerusalem? No, to Egypt.²

Egypt (vv. 13-15) is a land with ambiguous connotations. It is, of course, the place of bondage from which God had to deliver the people in the exodus. But it is also sometimes a place of refuge (1 Kings 11:40; 2 Kings 25:6; Jer. 43:1-7). Matthew tells the story of the holy family's flight to Egypt with incredible irony. In the exodus story, babies were slaughtered in Egypt by the wicked pharaoh. But now, righteous Jews must flee to Egypt to escape a massacre of infants in their own land (Matt. 2:16-18). It is not, of course, a detour without precedent: another Joseph, who was also guided by God through dreams, once brought his family here (Gen. 37--50). And, as it turns out, Jesus' sojourn here is a brief one. Soon, the family is directed back to Israel (vv. 20, 21), where they belong. But, alas! Another problem arises, and they wind up settling in Galilee.³

Galilee was commonly known as "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Matt. 4:15). Though once a part of the northern kingdom of Israel, the land had never really been recovered since its fall to the Assyrians, and it was now widely populated with "foreigners." The Jews in Judea considered

² Mark Alan Powell "Commentary on Gospel,"

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=12/30/2007&tab=4, accessed December 29, 2009.

³ Ibid.

Galilean Jews only a step above Samaritans. Settling here was definitely not a wise career move for anyone who wanted credentials as a Messiah (cf. John 7:41).

Then, the fourth, Nazareth is even worse. This little agricultural village, with a population of about 500, was so insignificant that, at one time, some historians and archaeologists denied that such a place had ever existed. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" may have been a proverb of the day. Certainly, these words of Nathanael recorded in John 4:46 would have represented a popular sentiment.⁴

What are we to conclude? That Jesus, who started out so promising, has faded fast? That his "fifteen minutes of fame" are over? No, we cannot conclude this, because Matthew advises us that everything is transpiring according to God's plan. God directs the holy family at every juncture. And, even more important, every move they make has scriptural significance: Bethlehem in Mic. 5:2 (cf. Matt. 2:6); Egypt in Hos. 11:1 (cf. Matt. 2:15); Galilee in Isa. 9:1 (cf. Matt. 4:15); and Nazareth in . . . well, actually, no one's sure just where that reference to Nazareth is found (cf. Matt. 2:23).⁵

What this portion of Matthew's narrative presents is an unexpected turn in the career of Jesus the Messiah, a turn toward lowliness and humility rather than grandeur and greatness. After leading the reader to believe that Jesus would be one before whom kings of the earth would either kneel or tremble (Matt 2:3, 11), Matthew now reveals that Jesus is to be identified with helpless, and vulnerable people of this world. In time, this will include his followers, who like him will be pursued from town to town (Matt. 10:23).⁶

The forced travels of Jesus and his family, from the time of his birth, underscore that Jesus is like many in the world today – a refugee and forced from his home. A horrific reality of twenty first century life is that a great many people in many parts of the world are simply at the mercy of political tyrants or unpredictable forces of nature that

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

determine where, when, how, and whether they will live. Our Gospel lesson for today, building in a sense on Paul's simple affirmations that Jesus was "born of woman" (i.e., "like us," Gal. 4:5) tells us that Jesus himself was one of these dispossessed ones.⁷

On this ninth day of Christmas, let us indeed be reminded that not only does a baby change everything, but this baby Jesus changed everything – forever. And a way we have heard this described is in the beautiful hymn “Once in Royal David’s City. First published in 1848 in Miss Cecil Humphrey’s hymnbook *Hymns for little Children*. A year later, H.J. Gauntlett discovered the poem by Cecil Alexander and set it to music which we began this service.⁸ Since 1919, the King's College Chapel (King's College, Cambridge) has begun its Christmas Eve service, the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, with “Once in Royal David's City” as the processional. The first verse is sung by a boy chorister of the Choir of King's Chapel as a solo. The second verse is sung by the choir, and the congregation joins in the third verse. Excluding the first verse, the hymn is accompanied by the organ. As the service is broadcast live on the BBC World Service, it is estimated that there are millions of listeners worldwide who tune in to this service. It is a beautiful hymn and it outlines how this baby Jesus changes everything. It is also the way in which we will begin the Lessons & Carols service today.

*Once in royal David's city
stood a lowly cattle shed,
where a mother laid her baby
in a manger for his bed:
Mary was that mother mild,
Jesus Christ her little child.*

*He came down to earth from heaven,
who is God and Lord of all,*

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Once_in_Royal_David%27s_City, accessed December 29, 2009.

*and his shelter was a stable,
and his cradle was a stall;
with the poor, the scorned, the lowly,
lived on earth our Savior holy.*

*And, through all his wondrous childhood,
he would honor and obey,
love and watch the lowly maiden
in whose gentle arms he lay:
Christian children all must be
mild, obedient, good as he.*

*For he is our childhood's pattern,
day by day like us he grew;
he was little, weak and helpless,
tears and smiles like us he knew.
and he feeleth for our sadness,
and he shareth in our gladness.*

*And our eyes at last shall see him,
through his own redeeming love;
for that Child who seemed so helpless
is our Lord in heaven above;
and he leads his children on
to the place where he is gone.*

*Not in that poor lowly stable,
with the oxen standing round,
we shall see him; but in heaven,
set at God's right hand on high;
when like stars his children crowned,
all in white shall wait around.⁹*

⁹ Hymn 102, *Hymnal 1982*, Church Publishing Company.

“All (God) needs is a little space in the manger, just a little willingness on our part in order for (the Divine) to be born on earth.”¹⁰

“The Nativity stories are compelling because they speak to the possibilities that exist for all of us. An unwed teenage gets pregnant...that can be frightening, but from that scary experience a child is born who influences the course of human history! The child is born homeless in a barn. But this child born in humble circumstances will come to be known as a prophet, a great teacher, even the son of God!...”¹¹ A baby changes everything.

¹⁰ Marianne Williamson as quoted in Sunshine Cathedral, Ft. Lauderdale, *Spirit & Truth* December 2009, 15.

¹¹ Rev. Dr. Durrell Watkins, Sunshine Cathedral, Ft. Lauderdale, *Spirit & Truth* December 2009, 15.