

Sermon: The Presence that Saves
Scriptures: Isaiah 63:7-9; Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23
First Sunday after Christmas Day
New Year Sunday
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Today's first scripture reading comes from Isaiah 63:7-9. Through the prophet Isaiah, God speaks of the redemption that is to come to the Israel in the latter day, illustrated by the mercies of God to the people of Israel of old. Hear now the Word of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah this morning.

Isaiah 63:7-9

I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD,
the praiseworthy acts of the LORD,
because of all that the LORD has done for us
and the great favor to the house of Israel
that the Lord has shown them according to the Lord's mercy,
according to the abundance of the Lord's steadfast love.

⁸ For the Lord said, "Surely they are my people,
children who will not act deceitfully,"

and the Lord became their savior

⁹ in all their distress.

It was no messenger or angel

but the Lord's presence that saved them;

in the Lord's love and pity it was the Lord who redeemed them;

the Lord lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

Amen.

Today's second Scripture reading comes from Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23. Matthew writes a short summary of what takes place after the Magi left the presence of Jesus and his journeys afterwards to fulfill the prophecy. Here now the Word of the Lord.

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

¹³ Now after they 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." ¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt ¹⁵ 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."

¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰ “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.” ²¹ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³ There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazarene.”

Amen.

Let us pray. Merciful God who is the Alpha and Omega, we thank you for leading us to your temple on the first day of the new year, to be sustained through your Word and promises. As we look upon the promises of old, we ask that you reveal your will upon us brightly this morning, that we may have hope for what is to come and to know that your presence will always sustain us. May the Words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing to you, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

Happy New Year! The dawn of 2023 is here. For many of us, we will make few mistakes when we write new checks. Let us take this time to greet one another, if you haven’t already with those around you with a happy new year.

A new year – each year that comes by, we have a feeling that is something new; complete new, but it is not a complete reset. It is a sort of a restart for all of us, to have the mindset of fresh beginnings. Whenever I think of a fresh beginnings, I always come back to this imagery. The younger folks may have never experienced this, but I am hoping that there are those who went bowling prior to the digital scoreboard. When I was at University of Illinois, they had old bowling alley in the basement of student union. Obviously, it has been upgraded since, but they had overhead projectors – remember those? – that displayed the frames and people had to manually write down their own scores. Writing down our own scores on the transparency gave us some benefits. I am not talking about giving yourself extra point or miscalculating your scores, but when you felt like you needed a fresh start in the middle of the game, you would start drawing a thick line between the frames you just finished and the new frame that is to come, marking of a fresh beginnings. It did not separate you from the past scores or added more chances for you to roll the bowling ball down the alley, yet it marked a significant change of an attitude and an outlook for the remainder of the game. I hope that today and this year 2023 marks a thick line in our journey of life in all of us, with COVID and its changes in our rearview mirror, and allows us to once again pursue our dreams and goals with full stride.

In today’s gospel message, Matthew highlights Joseph’s dreams and many refreshing beginnings. What we often overlook in these short verses that compressed many years, is that Joseph, who has been called to protect, provide, and love the Christ child never was

promised of avoiding hardships. Yet, it is the presence of God that continue to watch over him and the being the steadfast loving God whom God is, that allows them to make it through. This gospel story unfolds two layers of messages to us this morning – the first layer is the promises of the old, while the other layer is unveiling God’s continual mercy and love for all of us, especially through the Holy Family.

Today’s passage reminds us at every turn what Joseph and his family is going is the fulfillment of the prophecies for Jesus. Jesus, the perfect Israelite, had to go down to Egypt to escape the dangers of King Herod (the portion of the gospel reading we skipped this morning) and seek refuge there, just like the Israelites of old who had to escape the famine and lived in Egypt as a refugee until they were redeemed by God through Moses. Jesus had to connect to the past Israelites to not only fulfill the prophecy but also to redeem the people of Israel, the history, as well as all of humankind. Then he had to go back to Israel, to be their King, to be a God Emmanuel who is with the people whom he was called to redeem at Nazarene, fulfilling another prophecy. These few verses become an incredible foundation for the redemption and salvation for all of us.

At the same time, the story is full of God’s mercy and guidance for everyday walk for Joseph in his time. Whenever Joseph is faced with life altering moments, God shows up in Joseph’s dream, helping him discern the direction that he needs to pursue. God doesn’t just show up in a dream, but also through others, to provide the way. Can you imagine - how could a carpenter, who just spent all of his investment getting married and paying his dowry to Mary’s family, has the funds to move his family from Bethlehem to Egypt? Sure, it is obvious and an easy decision to leave the town when the King is searching for the child to make sure the child never sees the light of day, but with what means? With what ability? How could they move, and who would be the sponsors for their travels to a foreign land with different customs and different language? It is God with God’s plan, who sent Magi to worship the king of Kings as they followed the star with valuable gifts to make the trip possible. When it was the time to go back to Israel, Joseph wanted to go back to his hometown, to complete and finalize the marriage with Mary by bringing his bride back home. Yet when he heard and he became afraid, as he heard Herod’s son is still in control. Why did this news make Joseph afraid? My guess is that because Herod was terrible and awful king, and his son was very much like him. And Herod found out where they were going to be. When Jesus was born, Magi did not go back to Herod to tell him where the King they came to worship was born. Yet, in today’s skipped verses, King Herod targeted children under two in the vicinity of Bethlehem to be shown no mercy. I believe Herod knew it was going to be in Bethlehem because he must have consulted his scholars and found out what was written in the prophecies of old. After being warned again in his dream about what might take place in his hometown, the scripture this morning tells us that Joseph makes a decision to go to Nazareth, and that is symbolic for me. Joseph must have understood that Jesus will be always sought after by those who wanted to do harm and there is no place in his own

country that was safe in the worldly terms. But After the third divine dream he had, Joseph makes a decision to rely on divine protection of God, as he goes back to where all things begun: where Mary first encountered and had a revelation of who the child was meant to be and was the will of God through Angel Gabriel – nowhere else but Nazareth. Joseph must have come to a conclusion that wherever God's presence reigns, whatever God has promised, is the safest place to be, and where God is, God will continue to save. Just like when Joseph trusted and started fresh beginnings in Egypt, just like when Joseph trusted the message of God that his wife bears a child of only begotten son, that once again that God will take care of him and his family at Nazareth with his new, fresh beginnings, it became a blessing for generations to come.

Today, our lives are not much different than Joseph's. The entirety of the Bible tells us that God's promises extend to all of us, to all God's children. That God who was for Joseph and Mary and for the Christ child is the same God who has the same love and mercy for you and for me. There are no promises of tomorrow being easier than today. There are no promises that we will not face any obstacles in our journey of life. Yet what is certain is that God's presences will always be with us with every step we take, knowing that every joyful as well as the heavy steps we might take will not be taken alone, but with the Savior who has protected, provided, and continues to love us in every situation of our lives.

Therefore friends, let us trust in God's steadfast presence in our lives, let us trust in God's presence that saves, let us look forward to the brighter and the best year yet to come, by taking bold steps to make 2023 to be a year of jubilee in our hearts and in other people's hearts – a year to celebrate together. Amen.