

“A Divine Detour”

And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt (Matthew 2:14).

The Christmas story we cherish is a beautiful record of God’s love coming to us in the Christ Child. In a series of miraculous events, God provides for Mary and Joseph, and through the angelic announcement and leading of the star, the Christ Child is visited by lowly shepherds and lofty magi, and it all seems idyllic and enchanting...until we read on.

Today, as we move further into Matthew’s Gospel, we find God acting again. But this time, the Christmas peace is shattered by a divine detour that comes out of nowhere and forces Mary and Joseph, and their infant Son, to take a path they could have never anticipated. Imagine the confusion they must have felt. After the amazing events connected to Jesus’ birth, and immediately following the adoration of the wise men, the Holy Family was suddenly running for their lives.

As they made the long journey to Egypt, there must have been moments when they questioned the suffering and uncertainty that this urgent trip brought about. “If this was God’s Son and the promised Messiah who would save His people from their sins, then why are we running?” After all, they’d already relocated to Bethlehem, and now God was directing them to a place synonymous with the ancient slavery of God’s people. This was a journey that would have taken this young family weeks and caused them a great deal of difficulty, and yet, even for the family of Jesus, life doesn’t always go according to plan. It didn’t for Jesus, and it doesn’t for us.

Sometimes in life, we are forced to travel trails we would never choose, and often these paths take us through pain and loss, suffering and sadness. Instead of the straight and easy road we want, we find ourselves going another way; a way of difficulty; a way we never planned to take. And these detours are always accompanied by temptation to see our difficulties as a sign of God’s judgment, temptation to doubt God’s promises, and temptation to question God’s plan.

These detours frustrate the most faithful among us, and yet these difficulties shouldn’t surprise us. The Word of God is clear that struggle, pain, and loss are all part of the Christian life, just as they were for Christ Himself. And that’s why today’s text is so important, because in it, we learn that despite our doubts, and even through our suffering, God continues to work.

As impossible as it must have seemed to Joseph and Mary in the moment, God sent them on a detour, not to punish them, but to protect them. King Herod was an insanely jealous and brutal ruler, and, as we heard in today’s reading, his lust for power resulted in the murder of all of the baby boys in the region of Bethlehem who were two years old or under. Today, we honor the death of those Holy Innocents as the first martyrs of the New Testament, but this was more than an act of human cruelty; this was Satan’s first attack in a war to destroy the Messiah. You see, Satan knew the promise. In fact, the promise had been given directly to the serpent back in the Garden of Eden when God vowed, “the one born of the woman...will crush your head” (Genesis 3:15). The devil had hoped to snuff out the Savior while He was still a helpless child, but in the divine detour to Egypt God provided a way out.

God could have simply snuffed out Herod just like He had destroyed Pharaoh during the great Exodus from Egypt, but instead, God directed His Son to take a detour into Egypt, of all places. It makes no sense to us, but this divine detour to Egypt was part of God's plan of salvation, and this saving plan was born of humiliation. And this is the point of the incarnation: that in Jesus Christ, God is connected to us in our own flesh. This means that Christ carried the same burdens of humanity we carry. And He faced the same struggles we face. And He experienced all of life's trials and troubles and detours as one of us. This is what Christmas is all about; that, as true man, the Son of God – the Eternal Word – the Creator and Sustainer – the King of Kings and Lord of Lords set aside His divine power, and lived according to the flesh so that He could make the ultimate sacrifice as our perfect, sinless substitute on the cross. This is why Paul wrote in today's Epistle reading, "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law" (Gal. 4:4-5). And so, on His way home to Nazareth, the sinless Son of God was detoured, not merely because of a crazy and cruel king, but because this was God's plan for saving us.

As believers in Christ, we are also on our way home. Jesus said, "In my father's house are many rooms. I go there to prepare a place for you, and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me" (John 14:2-3). That's God's promise to you, and that is your destination! And yet, we all prefer that the road to this promised place would be as smooth as possible, and we all would like a painless path. But that's not always God's plan.

You see, following Jesus home means travelling the same road He did. Peter writes, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:12-13). Often, the lives of God's family members don't go as planned. We experience illness and loss and pain and suffering. And we often find ourselves perplexed and frightened, and travelling on a road we never anticipated.

And yet, God is still leading us home. A difficult path doesn't mean that God is angry with you or that you are not fully forgiven. No. God could not love you any more than He does right now. In fact, He loves you just as He loves His own Son! That's what the cross means, and today, Paul reminds us that "He redeemed us so that we might receive the full rights of sons." And just as He didn't destroy Herod on the spot, God doesn't always eliminate the evil we face either. Instead, He continually corrects us in our sin, and He constantly leads us to repentance, and by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, He persistently calls us home with words of forgiveness and a promise of life. And today, that is exactly what God is doing.

So, when the detours come, and the road seems to have taken a turn for the worse, know God has not abandoned you. God led the Holy Family home by another way to protect, to help, and to save them. And He leads us home by His divine detours for the very same reasons. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, "Amen."

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