

“Connected In Faith” – Mat 2:13-23

Well, here we are, breathless and somewhat exhausted after the buildup to Christmas and from both the preparations and the celebrations. We have hung the decorations and sung the carols, and scoffed down tons more food than is healthy. Our thoughts now turn to the future, both the immediate flip of the calendar that signals the New Year and also to the months and years that stretch out before us, and we wonder what surprises that future will hold.

One of the surprises is the passage we just heard from the Gospel according to Matthew. On the one hand there is the surprise that the joy of Christ’s birth would in this gospel at least turn so quickly to nastiness and to evil deeds; on the other hand is perhaps the surprise that I would even dare to preach on this text, arguably one of the most difficult texts in the New Testament to preach upon.

Why so difficult? The major problem centers around the inescapable fact that Matthew and Luke have considerably different accounts of the first few months or years of Jesus’ life. Oh to be sure, biblical literalists can – with a great deal of pretzel-like twisting and turning – and do try to explain away the differences, usually with a contorted mixing of the two stories. But all you have to do is actually read the two accounts and you will note the problems inherent in trying to resolve them by such intertwining.

We just heard Matthew’s account, how Joseph having been warned in a dream, fled with his fledgling family to Egypt, to wait out the days until Herod died, at which time they returned not to their home in Judea but to take up a new home in Nazareth. This incidentally is Matthew’s explanation or resolution of the question that seems to have been on peoples’ lips – namely, “how was it that ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ was actually born in Bethlehem?”

Contrast that with the familiar story from Luke’s gospel, in which Joseph and Mary are called from their home town of Nazareth to go to Bethlehem because of a census. No mention of the Egypt sojourn from Luke; in fact he outlines how eight days later Jesus was circumcised according to custom, and also according to scriptural injunctions in Leviticus they went to the temple in Jerusalem for the cleansing ritual – which would have been thirty-three days later. There in the temple they met Simeon who was ecstatic at having been able to hold the Messiah before he died, and then according to Luke, the blessed couple with their newborn “returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.” (Lk 2:39) It further seems that Luke understood that they remained there, because in Verse 41 he proclaims that “every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover” and we might recall that it was at one of those visits that Jesus acted a bit like a snotty pre-teen – but then went back with them to Nazareth “and was obedient to them.”

Can you see the challenge I face? We have two clearly different accounts, both in scripture. What do we do with such a situation? What are you to believe? I’m sorry to tell you that I’m not going to tell you what to believe. I will outline what works for me, but you and the Holy Spirit are going to have to work it out together for you.

We can identify a few options for wrestling with this issue. Perhaps the most common approach is to ignore the differences; to pretend any differences don’t exist and happily flip from one account to the other as the occasion rises. At the other extreme is also to pretend that the differences don’t exist but happily twist and manipulate the scriptures into some kind of simplified false unity. In between these two approaches lies a more difficult exercise, but one which I believe gives us a deeper and more honest grasp of God’s message in scripture. That path is the challenge of recognizing that the two gospel authors are relating differing versions – quite likely that they might even have heard differing versions that were circulating in the early faith communities – and relating the particular version of events that underscored and

emphasised what they wanted to convey as the main message about the meaning of Christ's birth, death, and resurrection.

For Matthew that main message is even emphasised right here in this short passage. Twelve times in his gospel Matthew uses the expression, "so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled." Three of those times are right here in this short reading. It is clear from this emphasis that Matthew really, really thinks it is important that we understand that Jesus is the fulfillment of Israelite prophecy. Given Matthew's strong and repeated emphasis it should not be a surprise to us that he would choose to relate a version of Jesus' early family history that not only conveys echoes of the most important defining event in Jewish history – the Exodus, or flight from Egypt – but also provides a fulfillment of various specific prophetic utterances.

Why was it important to Matthew to proclaim with such insistence that Jesus was the fulfillment of Jewish or Israelite prophecy, and perhaps more importantly why is it important for us to hear it? The answer to both of those is the same, namely that by being the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy Jesus is connected in faith with God and with God's reconciling actions throughout history. Matthew wants us to be in no doubt that Jesus was not – is not – some accidental fluke of history, appearing suddenly out of nowhere. For Matthew Jesus was not some capricious act of God but part of an ongoing covenantal relationship between God and people that had already been evidenced for thousands of years and that would carry on forever. With his repetition of Jesus fulfilling prophetic utterances Matthew emphasises that Jesus was not some popular invention of the people of the day, but that he was an integral and essential part of God's intention that people of faith would be reconciled with God.

And that's what works for me in dealing with this text. I'm willing to cut Matthew some slack, to back off a bit from the details of his account, and in doing so recognize not just the differences between Matthew's and Luke's accounts but more importantly what the two gospel authors share – namely a profound and unshakable faith that Jesus was no accident nor casual side-effect of God's love and grace. Both Matthew and Luke proclaim with all their being that Jesus was fully the Messiah, the Christ, and God's fulfilling of His desire that all people might find reconciliation with Him.

The underlying message in this account – and in Luke's – is that Jesus is connected in faith with all the grace and mercy of God throughout history, and that we in turn are also connected with that grace through our faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. Whatever the details may be of Jesus' birth, or his childhood, there is agreement throughout scripture that with his life, his death, and his resurrection Jesus sealed his connection with God, and our connection with God in faith.

And with that understanding refreshed in our minds, there is one more thing of importance that we might recall, and put into practice. As we move on into the New Year, with the angelic proclamations of Christ's birth still ringing in our ears, we would do well to ponder upon the significance of just how it was that God sealed our being connected in faith through Jesus – by God in Christ coming among his people, sharing their life experiences, their joys and pains and sorrows, and in the midst of his people ministering to them offering food, clothing, comfort, healing, and redemption. It is an appropriate time to search ourselves and our faith, and rediscover how we might follow that example, bringing in Christ's name concrete expressions of God's grace, mercy, and love to the community around us; to imagine and explore how we might move out into the community to help those around us also become connected in faith to a redeeming and reconciling God, and in so doing to realize the life abundant that God has offered and delivers in Christ Jesus, our Lord.