

# Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC

December 29, 2013  
First Sunday of Christmas

## “Post Partum Peril”

*“... 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....”  
(Matthew 2:13)*

### Prelude

Our lesson this morning is full of  
drama and intrigue;  
danger lurks ever so near,  
and the holy family needs to make haste,  
to escape, to pack up, take off,  
to get away, flee  
from menacing force(s) that threaten  
to destroy what good comes by way  
of the baby Jesus.

An angel appears to Joseph in a dream.  
The orders are issued:

**“Arise, and take the young child  
and his mother ... flee into Egypt  
and be thou there until I bring ... word:  
for Herod will seek the young child to  
destroy him.”**

Herod -- known as the Great.

Herod maintained his rule in Jerusalem  
over Judea,  
for close to forty years (41/37 BC-4 BC).

As a young man he had rubbed shoulders  
with Julius Caesar and received  
an appointment, his first office  
that carried some degree of authority  
and responsibility.

He later was favored by Mark Anthony -  
famed lover of Cleopatra,

who bestowed upon him the title --  
tetrarch of Judea (41BC);  
he couldn't maintain this fast track,  
    this swift ascent,  
and lost office; when deposed  
    Herod fled to Rome,  
and with Roman assistance  
he ascended to a throne in Jerusalem  
    to rule yet again.

Herod -- the Great --  
was skilled in using  
    carrot and stick.

Lots of building projects;  
he loved fortresses (Masada; Herodian)  
    and splendid public works,  
the most magnificent being the temple.

Today, if you venture to Jerusalem,  
you'll likely visit the Western Wall, the "Kotel,"  
and a prayer plaza, that defines the Temple Mount,  
    Mount Moriah.  
Millions visit there to pray facing massive stones  
that date from the reign and rule of  
    Herod the Great.

Herod - a shrewd mastermind.  
Yet suspicious of any potential usurpers;  
and savage, beastly cruel in protecting his  
position. He had an incredible appetite for violence;  
he was sadistic and brutal,  
a man without conscience  
    in protecting his place.  
There was neither love  
nor security in Herod's family camp -  
    only fear  
that one might be victim  
    of his paranoia.

Did Herod massacre the innocents in Bethlehem  
as is recorded in Matthew?

There is no independent reporting of such an act;  
and Matthew is the only gospel that mentions it.

Matthew's gospel contains much that some  
call Christian midrash - scripture driving  
the story line of gospel,  
as much as gospel unfolding  
as a fulfillment of scripture.

Whether Herod did or did not issue his order  
is beyond our means to tell.  
What is certain is this: there is no doubt that he  
was capable of orchestrating such terror.

Matthew's recording of the flight into Egypt  
is not designed to paint Herod in a bad light;  
Herod was capable of this on his own.  
Matthew has a theological interest in Egypt.  
He is making connections that are  
important for us to consider.

When promised land gets spoiled;  
when promised land becomes corrupted,  
and toxic,  
Egypt is a land of refuge;  
it is sanctuary.

Legends abound with regard to where the Holy family  
traveled, and where they lived for a spell, beyond the  
reach of those who might harm.

Some suggest the Holy Family  
was harbored in Gaza;  
some to the north of Cairo,  
some that they ventured deep  
down the Nile.

What is consistent:  
wherever the holy family made their way,  
there was to be found hospitality,  
welcome, safety, rest, and healing.

Matthew has an interest in establishing  
an Egyptian link to the salvation story.

Hosea 11:1 -  
"out of Egypt I called my Son."

Egypt was genesis of a God favored people;  
Egypt was the land where God heard and  
took action on behalf of the oppressed.

Matthew reminds us, connects us,  
the Jesus story parallels that of Moses,  
and Pharaohs with hard hearts,  
and Passover grace,  
and wilderness uncertainty,  
and in our future a promised land.

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Matthew has a second interest,  
Rachel, wailing, mourning,  
Rachel lamenting without consolation;  
children lost, children denied the time  
we consider so precious.

Matthew gives us a sharp  
dose of Christmas reality.  
Jesus -- born in a world  
with entrenched powers,  
resistant, averse, loath,  
disinclined to change.

When Mary sings her Magnificat,  
it is praise to God for the mighty that fall  
(Luke 1:52).

In Matthew, the mighty fall but not without a fight;  
not without blood, sweat, and tears.  
They scheme and plot and conspire;  
in league with death and fear,  
they seek to maintain their mastery  
of a world arrested with sin.

All this is part of incarnational grace,  
of love that not will not withdraw,  
but that condescends to seek and save  
and heal us of our wounds.

A word from Hosea, chapter of 11,

**“I led them with cords of human kindness,  
with bands of love.  
I was to them like those  
    who lift infants to their cheeks.  
I bent down to them,  
    and fed them”** (Hoseah 11:4).

Christmas wonder,  
Christmas joy,  
Christmas awe:  
    the Holy Child, Jesus,  
    is seen as heaven bending down;  
    the Divine Word, not hidden or withdrawn,  
        but drawing near, visible, revealed;  
    not silent, but speaking wisdom;  
    not strong and herculean,  
        but vulnerable and exposed;  
    not an immortal, but human.

The Child, Emmanuel,  
come to redeem a grief-stricken world,  
a world full of Rachel's lamenting  
the children they have lost to untimely  
death; children considered expendable  
by an indifferent world.

Rachel is weeping still in Ramah;  
and in Gaza;  
and in Stoney Hook;  
and in hollows and valleys  
throughout this land, any land,  
where poverty and children run  
    wild with neglect.

That's part of our story; our need for redemption;  
the Holy Child comes into such a world to lift  
our humanity to life according to God's design.

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The story ends, as it begins, with a dream.  
The whispered Word sets in motion a move,  
a return; and we, for a moment, can rest assured:

tyrants die;  
circumstances that look bleak and doubtful, change;  
    fortunes are altered;  
        hope is restored,  
            and vision of a better day prevails.

Christmas is not a season for observance;  
it is not soon to be swept away,  
exchanged for a new or different  
    entertainment.

The wise keep Christmas;  
the faithful live with Christmas;  
so we daily pray:  
long may the Child live and prosper  
    even in these perilous times,  
    in us, for us,  
    in and for the world.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,  
for the demands of the day are many;  
so be charitable as you read; and remember:  
the contents of this sermon have not been edited  
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*