

“God on the Move”
Matthew 2:13-23

It's been only six days since Jesus was “away in a manger” and “no crying he made” or so we are led to believe. But maybe that's what makes this “god-awful text” so jarring this morning. If I were writing the Christmas story I would have left more room between the serenity of the manger and the slaughter of the innocence. The reason is simple. “The slaughter of the innocents seems to take away the innocence of Christmas,” writes Karoline Lewis. “(And) it's too soon for that innocence to be packed up in green and red storage boxes only to be brought out again in a year. Yet, this is the hard truth of this text -- a truth for which we are not (quite) ready.” But we are never really ready to believe in or accept innocence lost. Herod seems so out of place at the manger but then again he never really made it, did he? He tried to find where the “Christ-child was to be born,” by appearing to side with the Magi while at the same time passive aggressive about the whole situation. He may have said to the foreign travelers that he too wanted to “worship” the newborn Christ but in truth he really only wanted to eliminate anyone - including three of his sons, along with others (and their families) who threatened his rule so what difference would the death of a baby or maybe a few dozen babies at most be in the giant scheme of things? But the Wise Men figured it all out, even before they had mounted their camels in the courtyard to leave. Although the edict had not yet been signed, sealed and delivered by Herod, the Magi's pace now intensified to find this “King of the Jews” before Herod found him - for if they didn't, their long and arduous journey was for naught. Tradition speaks, although our Sunday School Pageants fail to pick up on it, that the Wise Men did not enter the stable right after the shepherds moved stage right. No, the Wise Men showed up to see the “child” Jesus at the “house” and not the stable. History tells us the Wise Men came to see the toddler Jesus and his parents. We can only hope that this is the “first real memory” of Jesus – three wonderfully dressed kings from afar bringing him gifts on maybe his second birthday? This would be a wonderful recollection to have years later, don't you think? But as luck or maybe I should say, as human nature would have it, Jesus was probably not so fortunate.

I don't know about you but I don't remember much before I was 4 or so. When I was two, for example, our family moved from Hunter River, Prince Edward Island, where my Dad was a student minister in a four point rural charge and my stay at home mom was busy looking after 4 young and energetic boys. When I was two we moved to Quebec where my Dad began his Masters of Divinity at McGill and pastoring a student charge in Duvernay. Now I've heard lots of stories about Duvernay and told I even a little friend there. I've seen pictures of the manse and told again and again about one of the winters when we had to dig a tunnel just to get out our front door to make it to the side

walk. I've heard those stories so often that I honestly think they are my memories. But they aren't my memories but other people's memories of that time, told to me again and again. Maybe you're different. Maybe you can remember what happened to you when you were two but I can't and I trust Jesus can't either. Chances are some of Jesus' first memories were not the sterilized Christmas story we like to think about around this time of the year. Instead, I wonder if one of Jesus' first memories was a "dreamy" night that turned into a nightmare. It wasn't the first dream Joseph had had or at least that Scripture records of Joseph having. If you remember from our Advent stories (pre-Christmas accounts) Joseph had another dream one night. It was soon after Mary had dropped the bombshell that she was pregnant. Now Joseph, being a "righteous man" believed a story that you and I would have never believed. Mary was pregnant but she was still a virgin. She tried her best to explain what the angel had told her but I'm sure it came out all wrong. So when Joseph left her that day I "think" he probably went home to ponder how he could get out of this mess. But when an angel came to him in a dream and told him the story firsthand, Joseph believed, and we all know how the story ends. So, when another angel (or maybe the same angel) came to tell Joseph to "get out of Dodge" no one, including Mary was surprised that Joseph obeyed. Both Mary and Joseph knew (even if only in part) the extent God had gone to in coming to earth, and then had it confirmed when the Angels showed up at Jesus' first birthday and then the Wise Men at his second. And everyone knew, even by reputation, that Herod was as crazy as everyone believed he was. If Herod wanted Jesus dead and would kill every baby who lived nearby Bethlehem and who was around Jesus' age, then it would be better and safer to simply pack up and go. I hope this was not Jesus first real memory from his child hood, but I fear it might have been. I don't know everyone's "history" here this morning or the story of those who may happen upon this podcast online but I don't think many of us know the experience of being yanked from their crib in the middle of the night and rushed away to a place they had never visited to be safe. But maybe you do. Maybe you are one of the few who can relate to being rushed from an abusive parent or war torn country. Today there are far too many children who experience such a thing. So here is Jesus, bundled up by his mother with his father in a low but shaky voice, "We have to leave. We have to leave now!" Explanation of what follows is sparse, to say the least. The frantic journey of the new young family has little detail. And the edict of Herod is only recorded in Matthew's Gospel alone. No other historian makes note of it. Some pundits might tell you that it never happened because no one else records it. I would say this story is not "noteworthy" too many, except to you and I, people of faith. Herod doing something mad like this (although heinous to any rational human being) is common place to most – like our print or television media saying nothing about how another aboriginal woman has disappeared.

What is noteworthy however, are two questions that arise from our text this morning. Who is the One on the move? And where is this One going? The first question seems obvious – too obvious. Mary and Joseph and Baby Jesus are on the move of course. Herod was, as you now know, looking for Jesus. Even more, as you also know, Herod wanted to kill Jesus. So of course this family was on the move. Now in our heads we know the Christmas story, and if you aren't quite sure allow me, just for a second, to remind us, of who Jesus was. Although Scripture prefers "Son of God" as one of the favourite "titles" for Jesus, Jesus was in actuality not "Son" as in offspring of God but "Son" in the Biblical sense or the One who "inherits." In other words Jesus was not simply the "Son of God" but "God in the flesh." When we speak of Jesus then, even little bitty Jesus in the manger He was God then. Jesus did not "grow into being God" or "become God" when he laid down his life on the cross but from the moment the world saw him (at least a handful of people saw him at his birth) Jesus was God then and still is God. This was God in a manger. This was God cooing and crying, sucking and smiling. So, when Baby Jesus left, **God was on the move**. Just ponder that with me for a second. God was on the move. You see, the image most of us have inherited from our culture who lack understanding of God, typically see God as this grandfatherly figure sitting (not moving but sitting) on a throne and many within the church have that exact same image in their own heads. But here, in a few forgotten verses in Matthew, God is on the move. It's not a new image for God "walked" with Adam and Eve in the wilderness, "journeyed" with the traveling Hebrews in the wilderness and "met" with Moses on Mount Sinai just to name a few. So it should not surprise us that one of the first things God does, soon after God can is move. God is on the move. But maybe what does not surprise us as much as where God moves to.

You would think that God the Father would have worked out His plan down to the very last detail because God is a God of order but in an initial read the event seems rather chaotic. What seems to be a shock (at least to Mary, Joseph, Jesus and the rest of the world) is not shocking to God or even the ancient writers who penned their books centuries before Jesus was born. Now I know that the Middle East is nowhere near the size of Canada but there were many, too many to count, little towns, mountains and valleys, and cousins galore that the family could have stayed with until things cooled down. So if there were many better places to go why sojourn to a land infamous for idolatry, tyranny, and enmity to the people of God? Egypt had been a house of bondage to Israel. So it's no wonder that even dead Rachel (buried in Ramah) would weep as she watched her own people travel by her on their way to slavery in Egypt. But even more had God forgotten another mad king who did almost the exact same thing – that is – murdered young Hebrew children around the time of Moses? So why send Jesus to Egypt? As I drove in the car the other day I heard a "trailer" for the upcoming "As it Happens" radio broadcast. I didn't catch the name of the interviewee and I'm not sure

about the exact wording but it went something like this. “Come back and listen to the story of one reporter in Kabul who ran towards the recent explosion while others reporters ran away.” That’s it, I thought. That’s the continuing Christmas story. As Joy Carol Wallis writes, “Jesus didn’t enter a world of sparkly Christmas cards or a world of warm spiritual sentiment. Jesus enters a world of real pain, of serious dysfunction, a world of brokenness and political oppression. Jesus was born an outcast, a homeless person, a refugee, and finally he becomes a victim to the powers that be. Jesus is the perfect savior for outcasts, refugees, and nobodies. (And) that’s how the church is described in scripture time and time again – not as the best and the brightest – but those who in their weakness become a sign for the world of the wisdom and power of God.” (Joy Carol Wallis)

So if God is on the move and moving into the darkness, what does that say to us? If God was willing to enter, not just into the best but the worst of places, do you not think He might be asking us the same? You know as we enter into this time of the year, that is the end of one year and the beginning of another we often become reflective – looking back at what we didn’t do and looking forward to what we might do different. Well, the church is no different. Allyson and I briefly spoke the other day about the philosophy of a church in Ireland of whom Andy and Shirley Rogers call home. (Andy came and sang for us earlier in 2017) Their church encourages them to enter into their world and not simply wait for the world to come to them. They are asked to volunteer at a local school, (for example) become come part of town council, move in to serve and give back to some of the hardest places or those who are the hardest to love so that the gospel may be incarnated there as well. It’s not a new program, per sea, but a way to live out the gospel – disciples making disciples – a church on the move just like God. And I believe God is asking us to do likewise. More to come... Let us pray.