

Year A, The Second Sunday after Christmas: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84:1-8; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a; Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

Title: Our true home is where God is present

Sue's new year's resolution for 2017 was to read at least 20 of the great classics by the end of the year. Having failed to accomplish that goal, her 2018 new year's resolution was to read have read 10 such books. Last year her goal had dwindled to just reading 5 good books a year. This year, her resolution is to swimplly finish reading "Fannie Hill."

Fred's 2017 resoltion was to get his weight down below 180 pounds. The following year he was faced with having to declare that his goal was to to get below 190. Last year, Fred's resolution was to get below 200 pounds. This year Fred's new year's resolution is to try to develop a realistic attitude about weight.

Story lines do not always proceed as we would hope or as we would have it. It would seem that today's Gospel reading confronts us with something of a story line problem.

For the past couple of weeks we have been treated with comfortable and serene scenes of a Holy mother giving birth to a Holy child to the delight of a holy chorus of angels praising God and singing, 'Glory to God in the Highest and on earth, peace and goodwill towards all.'

And although, if we could have it, we might prefer to stay in a place of beauty and serenity, by way of Matthew's Gospel we are now called to leave the scene of the nativity for this disturbing scene of the holy family running for their very lives from a tyrannical king who would kill Jesus if he could get just get his hands on him. In other words, the holy family is running smack-dab into real life.

In our story this morning, the holy family is compelled to leave their home. They had no idea that circumstances would ever cause them to have to do so. Moving was not in their plans.

But for the holy family home has become a dangerous place. Such a dangerous place that Joseph was compelled to gather his wife and child and under the cover of darkness head out for Egypt. For them Egypt would be a place of unknowns. A place where things will look different; maybe even smell different. A place with a different culture and even a different lanquage. A place where they will be strangers in a strange land if you will.

But this is a journey born of necessity and a journey that is of the spur of the moment. Not a minute to lose. Take only what you can load on the donkey or carry on your back.

But Joseph and Mary have this going for them. They have their faith – the assurance of having heard God’s voice saying, “It is I, who leads you and it is I, says God, who will be with you.”

Joseph and Mary are entering what must seem like a dark place in their lives, but they do so carrying the light of their faith.

I happened to have watched a movie on New Year’s eve. It was a true story. It was about a man whose faith was grounded in the 7th Day Adventist church. The Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor and the war was on. Though he declared himself a conscientious objector, he nevertheless joined the army with the intention of carrying not a gun but the supplies of an army medic. He was scorned, ridiculed, even beaten by his platoon mates, yet he never wavered from his conviction that he would not carry a rifle and he would not kill. In the end he single-handedly saved the lives of over 75 men during the Battle of Okinawa and was declared a hero. His also was a faith that came with an assurance that he was living out his life that was in response to God’s call on his life.

Herod, of course, knows nothing of faith, nothing of God. Herod is the archtypical godless nemesis. Herod represents for us one who is ever ready to turn a deaf ear to God if it means letting go of that which he treasures – in his case that would be power and authority. Herod is so threatened by this Jesus that he is willing to execute a holocaust of infanticide to protect his interest. Herod is king. He lives in a castle. Yet, he is not at home in his own skin because home is where God is and he knows nothing of it. Herod is the character in this drama who tenaciously holds on to that which displeases God and thus he is deeply troubled by the presence and the reality of this Christ.

I would suggest that this is what we are to take from this story: Home is where God is and to deny that reality is to undermine our own spiritual health and well being.

There is a reason why this notion of ‘home’ is so present in literature, in poetry, and in song. I made a list of a few examples in just a few minutes: Simon and Garfunkel: Homeward Bound. Doc Watson: My Home’s Across the Blue Ridge Mountains. John Denver: Country Roads – Take Me Home. E.T. points to heaven with his little red finger and with a kind of yearning simply says, “home.” Home is a concept of peculiar and singular significance in our lives.

Herod, of course, was not "home" in the most important sense of the word. And he certainly was not at peace. And we are not home in the spiritual sense, in the most important sense, when we deny God’s ethereal presence or attempt to push God aside so that we can do what we want to do, or be who we want to be, as if God did not exist, much less matter. We tend to not do too well when we opt to deny the reality of the Divine Good that God calls us to.

On the other hand, although the forces of evil were causing the Holy Family to leave their worldly home, they were secure in knowing that they were both in the will and under the guidance and protection of God Almighty.

Home is a powerful concept. Books have been written about how the places we consider "home-base" are very significant to us.

A personal story: Several years ago, thanks to the generosity of a parishioner who owned a condo there, my family and I spent a lovely week on St. Simons Island. When Sunday rolled around I was very excited because we were going to attend services at St. Mark's Episcopal Church -- my parish home as a child -- my sort of spiritual "home-base" if you will.

The service was not very well attended. The sermon was, well not the best I had ever heard. In fact, I haven't a clue as to what the sermon was about. But I was so moved by the experience of worshipping at St. Mark's that I found myself weeping as I was saying the Nicene Creed. You see I had come home.

Home may indeed be where the heart is, but in its most important sense home it is where God is. Where God is present. Where God's will is embraced. Home is that space in which we live, and move, and have our being and where God is present and where God's love is known and dembraced.

Home, of course, is a physical place, but it is also that place and that space where we live our daily lives. And home is that place where we are at peace with ourselves in terms of the our inner spirit.

You see, Herod and all the Herod's of all time are simply not at home with God. In a way, our King Herod was home-less. Herod represents all who would destroy God, or ignore God, or push God off to a corner somewhere with instructins to God that God be quiet, if not invisible, so that we can be as selfish and self-absorbed as we want to be.

The Godless are homeless because they have separated themselves from the love and the wisdom God.

You know adopted children are just as much at home with their adopted parents as are children who live with their natural parents. And here we have Paul saying, "God destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ...to the praise of glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us...."

He might have said, "God destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ and therein we are welcomed home."

Not only is God's grace "freeing," it is itself "free" in the sense that it is a free gift from God.

The Latin picks up this connection in the word "gratia" which means grace, and "gratis" which means free. God's gracious love is free, and we are free to live in his presence, his love, and his grace.

We, no less than Paul's original readers, have trouble with this concept because we've grown up hearing that there is no free lunch. You want salvation, you've got to earn it. You want a

relationship with God, you've got to earn it. You want to be in communion with God, you've got to earn it. This unfortunately is why some stay away from church, or even if in church, stay away from the altar rail, and the food of life. They quite wrongly have come to believe that the benefits of the church are for the worthy. The point is, of course, *none of us are worthy*. The whole point of the eucharist is that we are unworthy – we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table.

Martin Luther struggled with this concept. He had been told by the church, a church that he believed in and loved dearly, that he could be justified before God and cleansed of his guilt only by doing certain things to make himself more pleasing to God: in his case to become a monk. To pray more, pray longer, pray more intently. Fast more. Go on a pilgrimage. And he did ALL those things but seemingly to no avail. He felt no closer to God and he felt no more worthy.

No matter how much he did, he felt he hadn't done enough. But then reading Romans one day, he discovered that while he could do nothing about his problem, God had already done everything. In other words, he had discovered the reality of grace, God's love freely given in spite of our own unworthiness. Martin Luther had discovered that in spite of our failings, God is ever present and ever willing to pick us up, dust us off, and bring us home.

Martin Luther had found his way back home. After all of this searching and doing he found himself in that place where one is bathed in the love of God, that state of grace, that place where we know we are loved, we are forgiven, and we are at home with the God who created and loves us all.

Like New Year's resolutions, sometimes our plans go awry. And like was the experience of the Holy Family, sometimes God calls us to places that we did not plan to go. But Jesus is always standing in the doorway, arms open wide and anxious to say, welcome home.

Joseph and Mary may have been on a journey where their physical home was in doubt but where ever they would go and whatever their circumstances, they were at home in the most important sense of the word.

Dear ones, my prayer is that this Holy Family, both individually and collectively as a congregation, seek to walk in as much confidence as did Joseph and Mary and maybe even as much as World War II verteran Desmond Doss, that we might rest in the Holy assurance that home is where God is, and by God's grace we are always welcome there.

Amen.