

## **The Second Sunday after Christmas Day**

**January 3, 2021**

**Said Mass**

**By the Reverend James Ross Smith**

*Jeremiah 31:7–14; Psalm 84:1–8; Ephesians 1:3–6, 15–19a;  
Matthew 2:13–23*

A couple of years ago, I had my DNA tested on 23 and Me and found out that 94.8% of my ancestry is British and Irish. One of my first thoughts when I read that report, was, “Well, my ancestors were a pretty unadventurous lot. There they were, living on a couple of islands on the western edge of the European continent, and there they stayed, until some unexpected impulse, ambition, crime, or disaster sent them off to this New World.”

But the more I thought about it it occurred to me that hidden underneath the words “British and Irish” are a host of upheavals caused by invasion, migration, displacement, conquest, famine, plague, and religious conflict. To say that one is mostly “British and Irish” is to suggest that it is likely that one’s ancestry is some composite of Celtic, Roman, Gallic, Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian, Norman, and perhaps a little bit of Spanish. In fact, analysis of my DNA shows that 4.5% of my ancestry is Ashkenazi Jewish, 0.3% is Coptic Egyptian, and 0.1% is North African. I wonder how

those ancestors found their place in my family tree? I wonder what pilgrimage, journey, encounter—or disaster— put them there?

And of course, since I live in the United States, I am descended all those Irish and British folks, who one day decided, happily or not, that they were going to leave everything behind and travel to a land they'd never seen; and that is true for most of us, I suppose. Unless our ancestors were Native American, we are all descended from those who dwelt fairly recently on some Old-World continent—Africa, Asia, Europe—which means that we are descended from people who lived for generations in a single region or village, until some terrible event compelled them to travel to another land. (Of course, for some, their ancestors had no choice in the matter. Their ancestors were brought here forcibly in chains.)

In one way or another, we are all descended from nomads, refugees, immigrants, or captives. Some momentous history of desperation, anxiety, fear, rage, anticipation, or excitement is inscribed in all our migrant DNA.

Perhaps it is because the past year was filled with so many upheavals that I could not help focusing on the movement, the migrations, and the fearful flights in the

gospel stories of Jesus' birth during Advent and Christmastide this season. I read those themes in those stories much more than I did anything about still or silent nights. While reading the stories about Jesus' infancy, it suddenly struck me: *that* was the price the Word of God had to pay in order to become human. Of necessity, God's eternal, changeless Son agreed to enter a world of constant change, a world on the move, a world of pilgrims, refugees, traveling merchants, Roman administrators, Roman soldiers, and all those Galileans and Judeans compelled to travel because of the Roman census. The eternal Word agrees to enter a sometimes beautiful, sometimes sinful, world, shaped by the ever-shifting tides of anxiety, expectation, desperation, joy, and fear. The Son of God agrees to become a migrant and a refugee. In short, he becomes a human being.

All this is particularly apparent in today's gospel. On first reading, the heart of that passage is Herod, an enraged, petulant, insecure tyrant, determined to hold on to power at any cost, even if it means slaughtering innocent children. The tyrant's rage and not-empty threats force Joseph to take Mary and the infant Jesus on a deliberately circuitous journey from Bethlehem to Egypt, then back to Judea, and, finally, at the last moment, to Nazareth in Galilee. This is not a journey.

It is a flight and then a return, all of it shaped by urgent political events.

On closer reading, of course, one discovers that the heart of today's gospel is *not* the tyrant, but God, who thwarts the tyrant's murderous intentions at every turn, and who designs the Holy Family's itinerary in order to fulfill prophecy and protect his Son, who is also the son of Mary and Joseph.

This story, along with the story of the Wise Men and the Wise Men's doings with Herod, will remind those who have read Genesis and Exodus of certain biblical antecedents. There are echoes here of Joseph, son of Jacob and Rachel, who is nearly killed by his brothers, hauled off to Egypt, sold into slavery, and who lands in prison through no fault of his own, but, eventually, becomes Egypt's viceroy and God's agent, bringing good out of evil. There are echoes, too, of the infant Moses, nearly killed by Pharaoh, along with all the Hebrews' male children, who grows up to defeat Pharaoh and lead his people home—or almost home—from Egypt.

These echoes are meant to remind us that God is in some way at the heart of every biblical story. God is not a God of murderous rage. God is the source of life, of peace, and of every blessing. And in many of the

biblical stories, God depends on human agents to accomplish his desire to bless, heal, transform, and save; and all of those human agents have a will of their own. All of them must decide to say either yes or no to God's invitation.

There is a very interesting moment in the story of that first Joseph, the son of Jacob. You may recall that in Genesis 37, Joseph has a dream that predicts that one day all of his brothers will bow down to him. Joseph decides to share this dream with his brothers, a decision that was unwise, since it fuels the brothers' hatred, but, truth be told, it may also have been arrogant and unkind. Years later the dream comes true. The brothers do bow down to Joseph, but they do not realize that it is he. And Joseph must make a decision, either for revenge or for forgiveness and reconciliation. He chooses the latter, and in doing so he says yes to God's desire to bring good out of evil.

We live in a moment of unexpected upheaval, inspired by the pandemic and by extraordinary political events. We are all pilgrims and travelers in an uncertain world, called to wrestle with God, with others, and with ourselves. But at the heart of the Christmas story there is hope: God sends a Savior who is God With Us, the incarnation of God's mercy and love, who always

brings good out of evil, and who asks us to do the same.

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