

RESPONSE TO GOD’S FORGIVENESS

(Glory be to the Father)

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

OLD TESTAMENT READING:

Isaiah 63: 7-9 Common English Bible (CEB)

Prayer of yearning

7 I will recount the Lord’s faithful acts;

I will sing the Lord’s praises,

because of all the Lord did for us,

for God’s great favor toward the house of Israel.

God treated them compassionately

and with deep affection.

8 God said, “Truly, they are my people,

children who won’t do what is wrong.”

God became their savior.

9 During all their distress, God also was distressed,

so a messenger who served him saved them.

In love and mercy, God redeemed them,

lifting and carrying them throughout earlier times.

((This is the Word of the Lord)) ((Thanks be to God))

Anthem

NEW TESTAMENT READING:

Matthew 2:13-23 Common English Bible (CEB)

Escape to Egypt

13 When the magi had departed, an angel from the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him.” 14 Joseph got up and, during the night, took the child and his mother to Egypt. 15 He stayed there until Herod died. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: I have called my son out of Egypt.

Murder of the Bethlehem children

16 When Herod knew the magi had fooled him, he grew very angry. He sent soldiers to kill all the children in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding territory who were two years old and younger, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. 17 This fulfilled the word spoken through Jeremiah the prophet:

18

A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and much grieving.
Rachel weeping for her children,
and she did not want to be comforted,
because they were no more.

Return from Egypt

19 After King Herod died, an angel from the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt. 20 “Get up,” the angel said, “and take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel. Those who were trying to kill the child are dead.” 21 Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus ruled over Judea in place of his father Herod, Joseph was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he went to the area of Galilee. 23 He settled in a city called Nazareth so that what was spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled: He will be called a Nazarene.

((This is the Word of the Lord)) ((Thanks be to God))

Our scriptures today are not the most uplifting, they are more difficult to deal with. Even in what seems like a positive spin of the Old Testament passage today, the context around that

passage is that everything was going wrong for Israel. Isaiah 63:7-9 is a reminder, of sorts, to Israel that they must still praise God. In a way, it's a hail mary pass to try to remind themselves of how God has been good in the past. There is still a possibility of God being good, even when things are difficult in the middle of Israel, there is still the *goodness* of God to lean on.

Then, we look at this New Testament passage. Christmas is here! We are celebrating the love of Christ, the Peace on Earth that was promised by the angels themselves. And all of a sudden, our Holy Family is fleeing. They are sneaking away in the dead of night to find safety that has been promised to them in Egypt. But that doesn't mean others are as safe. Other children are murdered in our passage because they were in the general proximity of a vengeful king and the general age of a different baby, who was moved in the night.

This year has been difficult for a lot of people. I don't know about y'all, but the Christmas spirit seemed to hit me later this year, and not as strong as it normally does. I don't know if I was just more tired this year, if things seemed a bit bleaker, or if I just wasn't paying attention. But I know that holidays don't always hold joy for people. That's okay too. Some have lost loved ones

this year, some have been reminded that though they may have lost someone farther back, often holidays bring a reminder of who isn't there anymore. Some may not have been able to travel to their families, or maybe some are part of a family who is not as close as those families on Facebook are (or seem to be). And maybe some are a part of a family who are not as close as they used to be. No matter what feelings are there, it is important to recognize that there can be a pain in the holidays as well.

I believe our Holy Family, this small group of three, is feeling that pain as well. Picture this story from Joseph's view. I encourage you to close your eyes, engaging in this practice of "Holy Imagination" for a moment.

You are Joseph. Your partner has just had a baby, she's already pretty stressed as I imagine most people are trying to learn how to care for a newborn. You finally get to sleep, Jesus has settled and shut his eyes maybe half an hour ago. You're laying down, drifting off with your family, knowing you're safe and sound.

A dream about a lovely angel, a messenger, but then they are yelling... "Get up! Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him." And you startle awake. It takes a

moment to catch your breath and take a look around. Then you remember the dream. It comes back all at once and you start moving. First waking up Mary, finding anything you need and throwing it into a bag. Finally, you wake up Jesus. You try to calm him down as you bundle him up and the three of you are out the door, fleeing for your lives.

Now you may open your eyes, coming back to the present. This experience doesn't seem like the Peace on Earth that was promised to Joseph by those same heavenly hosts just a couple months, maybe years, earlier. We know Jesus is under 2 years old in this story, but we don't know exactly how old he is. Joseph is just hanging out with his family, his wonderful spouse, this new baby, and he's starting to feel like he could have this under control. This dream startles him enough that he acts immediately. He gets up, he follows exactly what the angel says and they all flee to Egypt. I picture them throwing whatever belongings they could carry in a bag, trying to bundle a cranky toddler, and moving quickly to find the safety that was promised to them. They are leaving everything they know. They can't look back. There must be pain there.

Even then, they must wait to return. They only know that Jesus isn't safe with Herod as king. But even after Herod died, they still aren't safe so they find a third space that feels safer. Joseph is fully trusting the dreams that he is experiencing to keep his family safe. Unfortunately, not all of the children are as safe as Jesus. And this isn't the first time we have witnessed a king's murderous plan to maintain power. There is a precedent for a baby boy to be stowed away in the night, kept in safety while a king, or a Pharaoh, killed the other children. There is pain wrapped up in these moments of safety. But even as we remember that Moses was also protected by his family, and by God, we know that he was still required to leave. That his mother still lost her son. In this passage of our scripture today, there were some mothers who lost their children just as the mothers of the Hebrew children in Egypt lost them.

Jesus is protected by dreams, he is protected by the family that has vowed to raise him, Jesus is protected by the Creator of Heaven and Earth. God truly provides Jesus and his family safety even in the most difficult of moments. And the truth of this passage shines through, Jesus's life is a reflection of our own. Jesus's journey is one that we have a relationship with.

In the first years of Jesus's life, there is panic, there is a need to get up, flee to safety, and move from what is known into what is unknown. We are often called to this same movement...from the known to the unknown. You may be called to move from the safety of one job into another. You may be called from the safety of living in close proximity to your family and friends to a new and unfamiliar place. You may feel called to some unknown future, where only the next step is seen and nothing more. These calls, and others like them, are important despite their seeming lack of safety, and in our scripture, we see clearly, God provides us with safety even when it seems like there can't be anything safe in the unknown.

I can't imagine Joseph felt very confident about his choice to listen to the angels as Jesus was crying from being woken up in the night. When their feet got tired from running, I imagine he was feeling pretty defeated even though he was just trying to follow God's call. But he still went. Joseph saw that there was light at the end of the long night. Joseph trusted completely that God would provide the Peace that had been promised in Jesus's birth. In John 12:46, Jesus shouts: "I have come as a light into the world so that everyone who believes in me won't live in darkness."

The light is there. And God provides that light to us. Jesus is the light and the peace that the heavens promised to the earth.

This week, as I was preparing for Christmas and as I was thinking about what I would say to you, I kept thinking about the Winter Solstice. And I saw a beautiful statement, it said: “In the darkest days of the year, we celebrate the light. Because we need to be reminded that the light is still there.” Less than a week ago, the longest night of the year occurred. Often Churches will hold services that night to acknowledge the pain and darkness of the year that we have experienced. I think it is perfectly fitting, that four days later, we celebrate the Light of the World coming into being. That we celebrate Jesus as the light that will always outshine the darkness. In this holiday season, if it feels harder to be joyful, know that the light of the World is shining, brightly. Jesus was kept safe so that light could continue to shine. Joseph and Mary risked everything, fleeing in the darkness of night, and the light continued to shine. There is hope in the midst of the pain of this passage.

Jesus is the light that continues to shine for us. Emmanuel means, literally, “God with us.” The promise of God being present and invested in our lives was realized in Jesus’s birth and hold true despite the challenges we face in our lives. The promise of

Emmanuel also held true as Joseph and Mary fled from a vengeful king. We can not understand the full magnitude of this love and the reality of the incarnation of God. But we know that the promise of Emmanuel continues regardless of if we understand it. Jesus will continue to be our light in the stability and instability, the good and the bad, the known and the unknown.

So, where do we go from here?

When Joseph was faced with this question, an angel appeared before him and told him- in no uncertain terms- to flee, to move his family to safety. We may not have that angel appearing to us. We may have to see the signs on our own, piece them together and find what God is telling us.

No matter how God chooses to tell us the path that God has for us, we must go. We must follow that path. I hope and pray that this doesn't look like bundling our partners, and our toddlers and dashing away from murderous kings in the night. However, if this path includes leaving any amount of safety, I hope we are able to see the light of Jesus at the end of that long night. We are called to lean on the safety that God consistently provides, to know we will absolutely find safety on the other side of the call we hear. Just as Isaiah reminds Israel of the good that God has done, we must trust that there will be good again. We must trust that God has a

greater plan for our lives. We must look for the light in the darkest of nights.

Please pray with me,

Holy and wonderful God,

We know you have a plan in our lives. We know that you have provided light at the end of the darkest nights. We know you keep us safe because you kept your son safe. We continue to seek your plan and your safety for our lives. Keep us focused on you in our lives even while we feel lost and confused. We are forever grateful to you for your love and the Peace you have provided us.

In your son's name we pray,

Amen.

HYMN 27 : Gentle Mary Laid Her Child

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH: The Apostle's Creed

Please join me in affirming what we believe using the Apostle's Creed... "I BELIEVE in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he

descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:

We enter into the prayers of the people and the Lord's prayer, please pray with me.

God, we pray for many things today both in our hearts and outloud. We pray...

for the church universal ... that we may follow your path and find peace for all our siblings.

for this congregation, its mission and ministry ... that they may stand together and show your love and light to the world.

for the healing of the earth ... where there is pain and chasms between your children, and where the earth has been hurt, allow us to cross boundaries and heal your creation.

for peace and justice in the world ... that all your children may know the safety that you plan for them.

for nations and leaders ... that they may look to you for guidance and seek you within their leadership.

for the poor and oppressed ... that we may fight for justice for all people and stand with those that you would stand with.

for the bereaved and lonely ... that we may find them within our community and help them feel loved and heard in their time of pain.

for all who need healing ... that we may step up and realize our call to the ministry of presence, that all may feel your peace.

We pray together the prayer you taught us to pray saying: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name... your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil for yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen.

PRESENTATION OF TITHES AND OFFERINGS:

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it.

Let us return to God the offerings of our life
and the gifts of the earth.

RESPONSE: What Child is This

PRAYER of DEDICATION

God, thank you for the gifts that you have given this community. We give these back to you to further your work in this world and seeking your peace in these times. Use these gifts as well as our whole selves in a way that is pleasing to you. Amen.

HYMN 29: Go tell it on a Mountain

CHARGE AND BLESSING

As you go from this place, seek the Peace that the heavens have promised in Christ's birth.

As you go from this place, listen for God's call out of our own safety into the safety that God provides for us.

As you go from this place, go out in joy, be lead forth in peace and walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you've been called. AMEN

RESPONSE: Angels We Have Heard on High

*Come to Bethlehem and see Him Whose birth the angels sing;
Come, adore on bended knee Christ, the Lord, the newborn King.
Gloria, in excelsis Deo! Gloria, in excelsis Deo!*