

## A Dream That We Wish Joseph Might Have Had

Isaiah 63: 7-9; Matthew 2: 13-23

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by Pat Berger

Sometimes it seems to me as if time moves pretty fast in this world, and at this point in our biblical story, it seems as if it were moving rapidly then, too. Just a few days ago, we were focused on the birth of the Christ child, angels, shepherds, "Away in a Manger," kings coming from afar and bringing expensive gifts. And now, just these few short days later, and just one chapter further into Matthew's Gospel, Joseph hears in a dream that he must take that same baby Jesus and that baby's mother Mary and get out of the area because King Herod doesn't want competition for his throne and is set to kill all baby boys in his realm so that that might not happen.

Like his Old Testament namesake, this Joseph was a dreamer, and today we heard of three of his dreams, all of which served to emphasize the theology of the writer of the Gospel of Matthew. This Matthew was much more interested in telling his readers the meaning of events than he was in telling them how the events happened. Primary for our understanding is that God's actions initiate all human activity. This will make some of what we read in Matthew easier to grasp, some more difficult – and it is a main focus of this writer.

It is important that the readers of Matthew know that this writer believes Jesus to be the new Moses. So: in an action initiated by God long before, Moses and his people escaped from Egypt; and in an action initiated by God, an angel told Joseph in his first dream that his family must escape to Egypt. Jesus and his family became refugees. Unfortunately, that is a term that does not need to be explained to us, even all of these years later. The latest United Nations figure, from the middle of 2025, reports 42.5 million refugees worldwide, driven by conflicts in Sudan, Ukraine and Myanmar; over half of these are children.

Joseph's next dream came while the family was in Egypt. Herod had died, the angel said in this dream, and so they ought to return to Israel, which they did. On arriving in Judea, however, Joseph heard that Herod's son Archelaus was now the ruler. Joseph was not willing to take chances with what that might mean. The third dream came, and the result was that the family moved one more time, this time to Galilee, to a town called Nazareth, where they were finally able to settle. Nazareth was quite remote, and at the time not well respected; again, we see that God protects God's people, always and everywhere.

We get this same impression from our verses from Isaiah this morning, too, although we will need to read more than our lectionary verses to get the complete picture. The commentaries all urged reading the entire 63<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah in order to grasp what was said in the verses that Gina read for us, so: there is your assignment for this afternoon! In the first six verses of this chapter, we hear from God who is at this point tired and quite a bit undone by the behavior of God's beloved children. In verse 6, just before our verses, God says, "I trampled down peoples in my anger. I crushed them in my wrath" -- and then we get to read our verses, where Isaiah, speaking for God, tells of the praiseworthy acts of God, and reminds the people of all that God has done for them. When we continue in chapter 63, we are reminded many times of God's faithfulness, and of the people's lack of faithfulness. Like any loving parent, but more so, God keeps coming back and keeps covenant promises to the people. Always. Every day. One of the commentators suggested that, "even when the world is harsh and ugly and severe, the people of God [he means us!] ought to waken each day to utter and then live this prayer . . ." (verse 7 of today's reading): "I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD, the praiseworthy acts of the LORD, because of all that the LORD had done for us." The commentator's idea was that this would make "Christmas last much longer than 12 days," and would remind us that, "Christmas is always far more about God than it is about us."

What are we, the people who are Plymouth Presbyterian Church, doing to help refugees? The amounts of our offerings that go to the

national church have been, since 1947, helping with refugee resettlement through Church World Service. This is one of nine national, nongovernmental organizations with local offices serving newly arrived refugees and providing them with at least three months of services. And there are groups right here in St. Helens that some of you help with that assist refugees and non-refugees alike who come here.

Imagine what it is like for the Josephs of our day, when they have dreams that, instead of saying "run away!" say, "come over here instead! You are welcome here; have you had breakfast yet, do you have food for your family for dinner; do your children need hats or coats in this weather?" Imagine the Josephs of our day who we help to have dreams rather than nightmares? Thomas Troeger wrote, "How would *Silent Night, Holy Night* sound in our hearts if we had helped to create a world in which baby Jesus would never again be refugee Jesus?" God would surely say, may it ever be so. Let us, as a new year begins, do our part to make it happen.

Let us pray.