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## Gabriel One Last Time: Going Home for the New Year

Matthew 2:19-23 The Message Later, when Herod died, God's angel appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt: "Up, take the child and his mother and return to Israel. All those out to murder the child are dead." Joseph obeyed. He got up, took the child and his mother, and reentered Israel. When he heard, though, that Archelaus had succeeded his father, Herod, as king in Judea, he was afraid to go there. But then Joseph was directed in a dream to go to the hills of Galilee. On arrival, he settled in the village of Nazareth. This move was a fulfillment of the prophetic words, "He shall be called a Nazarene."

Throughout the Sundays leading up to Christmas, we imagined the Nativity scenes that are such a ubiquitous part of the season – and we expanded those to include some of the characters that are not normally an explicit part of those scenes. And one of those characters we kept running into was the angel Gabriel. He was there to tell the Temple priest Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth would conceive and bear a son who would be known as John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. He was there to tell Mary not to be afraid in the face of the seemingly terrible news that she was pregnant before marriage and not by her husband. He was there to tell Joseph that Mary's situation was not due to bad behavior but due to God's amazing grace. He was there to tell Joseph to take his family and flee to Egypt when King Herod determined to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem, telling him that the Savior of the world would be kept safe because of the willingness of foreigners to take in this refugee family. Gabriel does get around, doesn't he? And now today he is back for one final time in this extended Christmas story that really lasts not just a night, not just twelve days, but actually at least two years from the time Joseph and Mary fled their homes until the time they returned to their native land. He is back with a final message for Joseph – that Herod is now dead and it is safe to return to their homeland, their family and their friends.

A few weeks ago we looked closely at that flight from Bethlehem to Egypt and how, indeed, we can be grateful that there were folks willing to take in the Holy Family when they were refugees from terror. We also were reminded that the action of those long-ago Egyptians ought to give rise to gratitude in us, for without their hospitality Jesus would have perished by the evil hand of Herod. And we saw, then, how our gratitude ought to make us say no to those who would slam the door in the face of refugees from terror in our own day. Those are good and worthy things to remember in the face of a world that too often seems to give in to fear and xenophobia and hatred as we follow and worship a savior who was a refugee from such terror himself and who found people who took him in despite their own fears.

But today I want to turn this final Gabriel story in a different direction, looking at what it might have to teach us about our own lives as we begin a new calendar year. I want to ask how the story of Joseph and Mary and Jesus fleeing and then returning to their home can help us with the directions that we ought to go in our lives. And I believe in this regard, the story has three things to teach us.

The first point the story has for us is a wise one: **Pay attention.** *Pay attention.* After all, while you and I may not have known the cruelties of a Herod threatening our lives, each and every one of us **has** known things that cause us hurt and pain. Sometimes it's a relationship that is destructive instead of life-giving. Sometimes it's an idea about God that is just plain wrong and which makes our lives far worse than they need to be. Sometimes it is a pattern of behavior that does us great harm, and yet we return to it again and again. In the face of such hurtful and painful things what does this part of the Christmas story tell us? Well, it tells us that sometimes we need to pay attention to those intuitions prompting us to get away from whatever is hurting us, that we need, at least for a time to run away, to retreat. Preacher Edward Markquart puts the point this way:

*[Gabriel's] message to Joseph was [this]: "Joseph, you better go in a different direction or you and your family and your newborn son are going to be hurt." There are similar messages from God that come to your life and mine: "You had better be going in a different direction... [or you] are going to be hurt.... [So] God says, "[There] is a safe place for you to go. Go to this safe place. You need to be in a safe place right now."<sup>1</sup>*

Pay attention and go. *"There is a safe place for you to go... right now."*

Sometimes that is exactly the message that God puts into our lives, that God tries to tell us through the voices of trusted friends or God's own still small voice that tries to get our attention. Now, of course, it is true that if you don't confront the hurt, the pain, the destructive relationships or the self-defeating behaviors, they won't get better. But here's the point of the story Joseph and Mary's flight: You don't always need to stand and confront the evils, the hurts, the destructive patterns *right now, right this very minute*. No, sometimes you first need to go to a safe place – physically or mentally – so that you can recover, rest, regroup precisely in order to be able to face what it is that needs facing. When Barbara's and my children were small – four of them under the age of nine living in a house with one shower – there were days that, much as we loved them dearly, one or the other of us was ready to have ourselves committed. One of us would sometimes say in those moments when the drama and the to-do list and the fights of siblings was about to overwhelm us, *"I'm going to run away from home now!"* The deal that Barbara and I had was two-fold: First, that neither one of us said that lightly or over-used it; to say that was reserved only for those times when we felt utterly at the ends of our ropes. And the second part of the deal was that when that phrase was invoked, the other one of us would find a way to let the overwhelmed one indeed flee for awhile – to a movie, to the mall, or maybe just to the bedroom with the door

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Markquart, "Herod and Historical Probability,"  
[www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series\\_a\\_herod\\_and\\_historical\\_probability.htm](http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_a_herod_and_historical_probability.htm)

closed for a couple of hours and being off of kid duty. More than once, such “fleeing” kept us from saying things to our children or to one another that might have been permanently hurtful, or doing something we’d regret. Sometimes you’re just not able to fight, to confront at the moment. **So, the first point is this: Pay attention to those intuitions, those trusted friends, who are telling you on occasion that you need to flee in order to be able to return.** Sometimes you just need to get away in order to come back.

And that leads me to the second point of this extended story that applies to your life and mine: **Don’t be afraid to change your plans.** Indeed, Joseph and Mary and the now-toddler Jesus did come back, as our scripture for the morning recounts. But even then, they found that they couldn’t come back to Bethlehem because while Herod was dead, his son lived on - a son who was apparently just as evil and immoral as his father had been. There are times that I wish the Gospel of John had said this about the coming of Christ: *“And the light shined in the darkness and the darkness was totally defeated and vanquished forevermore. Done. Over. Forever gone.”* But it doesn’t say that, and that would in fact be dishonest. No, it says *“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”* Even when Joseph and Mary return, they find that the darkness of evil from Herod’s extended family was still there. It did not and will not finally defeat the force of God’s love, but it was still there nonetheless. But having fled and regrouped and re-energized, they were now able to deal with it. And when you and I return from those times when **we** needed to flee from what was threatening us we will often find that though the threat or worry or problem is still there, we will have new energy, new courage, and new ideas for dealing with it. But to do so, we need not to be afraid to change our plans. Mary and Joseph didn’t got back to Bethlehem. They changed directions and went to Nazareth instead.

And what’s the third point that this story can teach us? **Ask directions on your**

**journey.** Barbara and I had a delightful two nights earlier this week in Astoria, Oregon, with the second part of our 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration and following the lovely craziness of a houseful of family for Christmas. We decided to go out to eat and looked up the restaurant we wanted to go to on Yelp, plugged the location into my iPhone, and dutifully followed its directions only to find ourselves staring out into the Columbia River where the phone's GPS said the restaurant was supposed to be. This didn't seem right. And so I punched the restaurant's listing on my phone, the phone number came up, and I called and asked for directions. Now, I confess I may have to turn in my manly membership for doing so, but it really was so much more helpful than driving up and down on the dark Columbia River bank uttering bad words. Even Barbara said, in an incredulous but happy tone: "You asked for directions!!!" It turns out that the restaurant was 300 yards away and yet hidden and I would have never found it on my own but would have ruined the evening if I had not asked for directions.

Now, this story of the Holy Family's return from Egypt doesn't explicitly mention folks who gave them directions. But, on the other hand, I can't imagine that they could have successfully made their journey without folks to tell them that there was water this way, that there were bandits that way, that in this direction lay Herod's son, and in that direction lay safety. Now, not all directions are equally good; like my phone's GPS, blindly following directions can lead you into the middle of a river or worse. That's exactly why we need a community, a church, to help us find our way together. It's why we do Bible study together, it's why we will be, as I said in my January Visitor article, talking and praying together in the coming months about some very serious and important topics. There's much less chance that any one of us will go off half-cocked in the wrong direction if we carefully listen to one another. Just as Mary and Joseph no doubt depended on the kindness of folks to know the way to go, so too in your life and my life we need folks who will help us know the way to go, who will give us their best

insights, who will assume the best about us, who will pray for us. If you are one who is finding that your own way right now is leading you into the middle of a river, then take a cue from this story and ask directions.

My friends, four Sundays ago we spoke of Gabriel's first appearance in bringing the good news to Zechariah. And on this day we conclude that extended Christmas story with the final events that Gabriel set in motion. And what we learn from this story is this: First, **pay attention** to the signs that you need a break, that you need a place of refuge, that you need to flee to a safe place for awhile. For sometimes life is such that you and I need to get away from what is hurting us. Second, after you have returned – rested, renewed, resolved – **don't be afraid to change directions**. Don't become so fixated on your destination that you ignore the opportunities before you for something even better. And third, and finally, **never be afraid to ask for directions** on your journey as you immerse yourself in a community that cares for God and this world and for you. Listen to what the community has to say. Be willing to go a different way because of the power of what you learn from others. For in the end it is through such a community, it is through the church, that we indeed know and have our ultimate comfort and hope, indeed, in the news that "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it."