

“Faithful and Discerning”

Matthew 2:13-23

The Rev. Joanna Samuelson
Interim Associate Minister

January 1, 2023

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

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O Ever-present God, come, come to us now. Still our busy minds, stir our spirits, and open our hearts to Your Word and to the words that you place on each of our hearts. And, O dear God, may the words that I have to offer this morning please You and honor You and glorify your holy name.

In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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I must begin this morning by acknowledging that it was a **struggle** to prepare this sermon for today.

After all, in this Yuletide season of singing Christmas carols and exchanging gifts and attending family gatherings and workplace parties – during this “most wonderful time of the year,” as Andy Williams used to sing – who wants to hear this *horrific* story from the Bible which is commonly referred to as “The Massacre of the Innocents?!”

Our Gospel reading for today is a **very** disturbing story that we encounter every **three years** in our lectionary cycle because **Matthew** is the only Gospel that includes this difficult and painful story.

(As an aside, years ago, when I was in seminary, my classmates and I used to commiserate and encourage one another at this time because

WE were often the ones who had to *preach* on this text, *as student pastors*, since **most settled pastors** often take much-needed vacation time on *this* Sunday after *such* a busy Advent/Christmas season!)

Back to our text for today ...

As you may recall, Herod, the “so-called” Great, ruled all of Palestine at the time of Jesus’ birth. Now, Herod *was known* for his magnificent buildings and his improvement projects throughout Jerusalem – including expanding and refurbishing the Temple.

BUT as we all know ... Herod was also in love with power and control and wealth and prestige. And to say that he was an egomaniac is an understatement!

For Herod was someone who **appeared** to be especially confident – and yet, we all know his ego was exceptionally fragile.

Herod was extremely insecure – and paranoid – to the extent that he was *even threatened* by the news of the birth of an innocent baby.

For it was the wondrous birth of the One named Jesus who – earlier in Matthew (chapter 2) – inspired and prompted and led the Magi to travel a great distance from the East, exclaiming,

“Where is the One who has been born King of the Jews?

We saw his star when it rose, and we have come to worship Him.”

And so, **all of that**, as you may recall, is the backstory of our Gospel reading for this morning which is often referred to as “the flight into Egypt.”

Now, of course, there are many different ways to interpret this distressing story which, I have to believe, stirs up some feelings of

anxiety and maybe even some panic each time that we read it – **even though** we know the ending.

We know that Mary and Joseph and young Jesus will **eventually** return from Egypt **safely** – and make their home in Nazareth.

As I wrestled with this text – **this time** – I found myself being especially drawn to Joseph and his steady and thoughtful and patient and faithful presence throughout this pericope.

This time, I was struck by *how much Joseph has to teach us* – this humble and understated one – this who **doesn't even speak a word** in this story – in this foundational story of our Christian tradition!

Now, even though Joseph **does** play a central role in the birth narrative, of course, as Jesus' earthly father, there isn't much written about him in Biblical commentaries and journal articles *relative* to Mary and the disciples and other key figures of the Gospel stories.

It is very interesting to me that even though Joseph is **mentioned** in all four Gospels, not a word of what he ever said was recorded. We've all heard that expression before that "Actions speak louder than words." And, if that is true, Joseph speaks volumes!

Here is a man who was engaged to be married when he **learned** that his fiancée was pregnant with a child who was not his!

THAT, in and of itself, is *certainly* enough for Joseph to have an existential crisis at that time! **And yet**, Joseph seemed to have this capacity to pause and to reflect and to pray and to *discern*.

And so, (as we learned back in the first chapter of Matthew), Joseph was able to open himself up to *listen* for God's prompting and guidance in that time of mixed feelings and confusion and distress.

And it was **then** that an angel of God spoke to Joseph through a **dream** so that Joseph would understand **how** God was calling him.

And when Joseph woke up, he did what God had commanded him to do – and as you already know, Mary and he were then married – according to God’s plan.

And then, the next time that we read about Joseph is in our reading for this morning in Matthew 2 – in this story that takes place just *after* the magi had left for home.

Again, the angel of God came to Joseph in a **dream**, and this time, instructed Joseph to **flee to Egypt** with Mary and their young child, Jesus – and **not** to return until the angel appears to him again.

And then, **later** in our text for today, the angel of God **returns** and speaks to Joseph **one more time** in a dream and instructs him to: “Get up! And take your family back to the land of Israel.”

And **that** is exactly what Joseph did!

Our Gospel reading for this morning is significant for a number of different reasons.

But, reading it again, here and now, at this time – in our life together as First Church – it speaks to **me** differently than ever before.

It speaks to me about the spiritual practice of *discernment*!

Discernment – as you may know – literally means “to separate or to decide or to distinguish between two things.”

And so, **spiritual discernment**, then, is simply trying to be more **faithful** in listening for God’s voice and for God’s direction for our

lives – with the understanding, of course – that God speaks to each one of us in different ways and at different times along our spiritual journeys.

Maybe some of you are like Joseph – and have experienced clarity – or discovered the answers you had been seeking – through your dreams! (In psychotherapy, this is referred to as dream analysis or dream interpretation!)

Perhaps God speaks to you **often** through the stories of Scripture.

Or maybe it's through the voices of others or the mentors or the “wise ones” who God places in your life.

I know that for many of you, God *often* touches your spirits through the gift of music.

Or the visual arts.

Or through poetry or other inspired writing.

Or when you are simply outdoors in nature, and you finally find yourself at peace!

For me, God often speaks to me through my gut – so to speak! There are these times when I just get *a gut feeling* about something – or perhaps it's my intuition – which then prompts me to seek clarification or gather more information.

Regardless of **HOW** God speaks to us, it is certain that our living and loving God longs to connect with **each** one of us and to be in relationship *with* us in ways that motivate us and inspire us – in the decisions that we make and the in the lives that we lead – together.

Now, I **certainly** don't need to tell any of you that here, at First Church, we are *moving through* a time of SIGNIFICANT transition and change – as we name and claim all of our mixed feelings that are *natural and to be expected* – and that come with the recent staffing changes, here, at church.

And yet, at the very same time, this is also a time of hope and promise as search committees form – and earnest and thoughtful and meaningful and productive conversations take place – as members and leaders of the church *come together* to:

listen to one other –
and **discuss** together –
and **plan** together –
and **brainstorm** together –
and as they all **DISCERN** together.

ALL of us – every single one of us – **IS** called to be **faithful and discerning** *like Joseph* – as we continue to serve our congregation – and the wider community – **WHILE** we live into God's dream for First Church today – and for tomorrow!

I'd like to close this morning with some words of inspiration that were written by the late Rev. Henri Nouwen, an author and sage and spiritual mentor to many.

These are certainly words to ground us during times of uncertainty and change and in times of discernment:

Often, we want to be able to see into the future.

We say, “How will next year be for us?”
or “Where will we be in five or ten years from now?”

There are no answers to these questions.

Mostly we have just enough light to see the next step:
what we have to do in the coming hour or the following day.

The art of living is to enjoy what we can see
and not complain about what remains in the dark.

When we are able to take the next step
with the trust that we will have enough light for the step that follows,
we can walk through life with joy
and be surprised at how far we go.

Let us rejoice in the little light that we do carry
and not ask for the great beam that would take all shadows away.

Thanks be to God,

Amen!

