

“New Year, New Journey”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
January 1, 2023 – First Sunday after Christmas Day

[Isaiah 63:7-9; Matthew 2:13-23](#)

Comparisons and contrasts are important elements of good storytelling, and the author of Matthew provides these for us in today’s heartbreaking but hopeful gospel lesson. Those who first heard the gospel, written for a community of Jewish Christians, certainly would have recognized in them much that is familiar to which they could compare their own story. Surely, they would have recognized the similarities in the story of the family of Jesus traveling to Egypt shortly after his birth and the stories they learned as children about their own ancestors’ journeys from the land of Palestine to Egypt and then back. Likewise, they would have recognized the story’s characters echoing the characters of the older stories, with dreaming Joseph reminding them of the dreaming, colorful coat-wearing Joseph of the book of Genesis, Herod the child-slaughtering tyrant reminding them of Pharaoh, who in his own time had the enslaved Israelites’ babies put to death, and young Jesus reminding them of young Moses, both of whom were saved from tyrant kings’ destructive hands only by the providence of God through bold and faithful acts of their parents. The gospel makes these comparisons because it intends to demonstrate that Jesus is like Moses in being a great law-giver and savior of his people, and we will hear this message time and again as we explore together the book of Matthew in this year’s lectionary readings.

And the first hearers of Matthew’s gospel would have been struck, as we are today, by the stark contrasts of the story, particularly the contrast between Joseph and Herod and their very different responses to the dangerous situations they found themselves in. In the passage in Matthew’s gospel just before today’s reading, the story of the magi coming from afar to worship a newly born king of the Jews, we find old King Herod, along with “all of Jerusalem,” being troubled by the news that a star had appeared to the magi as a sign that the Messiah, or Christ, had been born. For Herod, this was not good news, but bad news and a troubling problem to be addressed, as Herod addressed many problems, by the sword. As we heard in today’s lesson, this is what fearful, furious Herod did as he had the children of Bethlehem and the region around it put to death.

The fearful, violent response of Herod to the threat to his reign posed by baby Jesus is contrasted by the response of Joseph to the threat against his own life by Herod. Joseph responded not by freezing in fear or resorting to violence, but by trusting in God's message of salvation for him and his family that was given to him in a dream. By trusting God's message and taking action, leaving the familiar family home in Bethlehem, where he and his family were, and journeying to an unknown, foreign land of Egypt when God said to go, and then leaving that place for Galilee when God again provided a message for him in a dream, Joseph and his family were saved and Jesus was given the opportunity to grow and learn from faithful Joseph to also respond boldly in faith to God's calling upon him, going where he was called to go and doing what he was called to do, becoming the savior for all people.

Friends, here we are in the first hours of this new year, and we can be inspired by this old story to follow in the footsteps of Joseph ourselves as we face whatever lies before us on our own uncertain life journeys. Surely, we will all face challenges in 2023, and some of us will face great difficulties. There will be moments when we are unsure, unsteady, or uneasy. But we are all able, by the gracious provision of God, to respond to life's difficulties not by fear, but by faith. No matter the winding road that brought you to where you are today, the steps of the journey in front of you are new steps, and you are enabled to take new steps in new ways. Move forward now on this new journey in faith and love.

And as we live in a world in which Herods and Pharaohs still wield power and cause the innocent and helpless to suffer, use your own energies to resist the cruel tyrants and their evil ways. In faith, give of your time, talent, treasure to support those who are harmed by the tyrants' hands. Lift up in prayer in 2023 those who begin this new year as refugees, whether they are fleeing from the evils of a tyrant's war in Europe or are now at our southern border after long, dangerous, and desperate journeys away from violence or oppression in the lands of their birth. And if you find yourself needing to travel away from any kind of oppression or violence, trust in God and move forward. If you need help to strengthen you on your journey, turn to one another or turn to trusted friends or family. Reach out to me, one of our deacons, or others at the church if you are feeling lost or stuck and don't know where to turn or just need someone to share the journey with you. Let us lift up one another this new year.

Dear friends, I believe that it is God's will for all of us in this new year to have a new experience of God's goodness and God's grace and to be God's agents of new goodness and grace for one another and all in the world. Let us move forward on this new journey together, and as we go, may we be blessed anew with God's peace. Amen.