

“So John, why *two* Gospel readings today?”

The simple answer is to be found in the fact that we sang “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” which is not properly a “Christmas Carol,” but a song of the *Epiphany*, which is January 6, not a Sunday, and that I have combined some of the readings for that day with some of the readings the theologians give us in the Revised Common Lectionary for this first Sunday after Christmas, or of *Christmastide*, as I prefer to call it.

But the calendar and the Lectionary notwithstanding, I think God might have intended that we do read both of the Matthew passages, because whether or not Matthew intended so, I think there is an interesting contrast between the behavior of the Magi — it is a constant dispute as to whether Matthew was talking about three kings or three wise men; the argument for “kings” comes from the Old Testament passages we read, while I’ll state later the argument for “wise men,” or even three something-else’s — I think there is an interesting contrast between the behavior of the Magi and the behavior of Joseph, of whom I spoke so highly two weeks ago.

But it isn’t Joseph’s fault.

Allow me a bit of Bible background concerning the Gospel according to Matthew. As I have remarked before, while the Matthew and Luke versions of the good news of Jesus rely on Mark and another shared source, each not only presents some material unique to that writer’s version, but each writer has a particular point the writer wishes to make — and Matthew’s is that Jews who had become followers of Jesus could be reassured of the correctness of their decisions, and that other Jews should understand that Jesus was the anointed one, the *messiah*, and that they, too, should become His followers. One of the ways that the writer of Matthew tries to do this is to show that Jesus is foretold by the Hebrew scriptures — as in our third Isaiah and Psalms readings today, — and another is to show that before his ministry, Jesus experienced the history of the Jewish people — and so in a story which is told only in Matthew and none of the other versions of the Gospel, Joseph’s and Mary’s and the baby Jesus’ flight into Egypt

parallels the movement of Jacob and his sons into Egypt, while Herod's not-otherwise-reported killing of Jewish baby boys sounds intentionally reminiscent of what the Pharaoh had decreed in Egypt just before Moses was born.

And though our Old Testament readings support the idea of the Magi as kings, I believe the writer might have intended us to understand the Magi as wise men from the East representing the sages of Persia, the land that had freed the Jews from their Babylonian captivity more than five centuries before Christ. Why do I say this? Because if wise men from Persia could recognize that Jesus was the messiah, the writer seems to be saying, so should you, my fellow Jews. So should we accept that Jesus was indeed, *is* indeed, the messiah.

But the difference I want to make between the journey of the Magi and the flight of Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus is this, and I suspect the writer of Matthew overlooked it: Joseph was running *from*; the Magi were traveling *to*; Joseph was fleeing from; the Magi were seeking.

And I think there is a message for us in our own lives that is perhaps symbolized by what we are doing in observing this Sacrament this morning.

Allow me to expand a little bit. Flight without knowing to what one is fleeing *to* but rather only what one is fleeing *from* does not offer much promise other than perhaps a brief respite from that from which we are fleeing; it is not an act of positive purpose, but only an act of fear; it avoids, but does not resolve. Stripped — which might be unfair to the writer of Matthew — of a sense other than fear, the Matthew story of Joseph's and Mary's and the baby Jesus' flight into Egypt would have no particular purpose; a flight into Syria or into what is now Turkey would have functioned to avoid Herod just as well. There was no positive purpose other than staying alive in this story — unless it is meant to show a parallel with the story of Jacob and his sons and of the Exodus back to the Holy Land; Joseph's flight is just fleeing *from*, not *to*.

But the Magi, they presumably traveled some distance *to*; they had a positive objective, which was to see this baby born “King of the Jews.”

So what about us in the various times in our lives when we wish to get away from something we do not like; are we content with just avoidance or flight, or do we seek to find something better? Do we have a positive purpose? As a church, we say we have a purpose, our mission statement, but do we rush to it, or do we flee from taking Jesus into the world, and shrink into our comfort zone?

And I cannot help but add that turning *to* Christ, even when we are afraid or troubled in the course of our lives, is not the same as fleeing from, for in Christ we get not merely respite, not merely an escape from a bad place, but something much more: a sense of the security that is knowing we have a safe place — and I do not mean just at the end of our lives. There is a calming but also a re-energizing benefit in fleeing to Christ; there is comfort and reassurance when we take the time to pray, and, in those prayers, we can often find a sense of the direction in which we are to go that can never be found in simply fleeing *from*.

And this table is a reminder of that, and *reminder* is not a bad term. Christ is present with us, here, and we are reminded of the night that, rather than to flee *from*, he went *to* the task to which His father had directed Him; He went to death, but death for a purpose, and one of those purposes is fulfilled when we gather and remember that, on the night before he died,