

There are just some things that I hated as a toddler that I love now.

1. Receiving socks as a gift.
2. Long car rides.
3. Naps.
4. Admitting I'm wrong.

There's a trend in churches calling to eliminate confession and absolution from the liturgy, because it makes people feel yucky. And honestly, it's probably not appealing to go to a church that makes you feel yucky. I mean, if the point of religion is to teach us to differentiate between good and evil, and more importantly, to choose the former. Who wants to start out each week admitting you're wrong and saying that you didn't manage to pull that off yet again?

I know that I myself will go to extraordinary lengths to fight that truth, that as much as I try I fail to choose good, I will always have shortcomings. I can pretend and contort and manipulate to avoid the truth until I go red in the face like a toddler trying to avoid their nap. That is, until you see them stop fighting and fall asleep and receive their rest, the very thing they need and the very thing they were fighting. That's exactly the kind of God we're working with, friends, that's exactly who God is looking for. People who will let God fight for them.

The truth we're fighting against comes to us and it changes us. It comes in the act of kindness of a friend, significant other, or mentor. In the language of scripture spoken in a community. In the prayers of the people. Truths spoken like, how we fail to live up to even our own values. Truth like, how we turn from God and pursue false promises. Truth like, how I am a little bit broken and can't seem to fix myself. In our reading today, Moses helps us realize encounters with Truth are hard and require you to step into something that feels like it might just crush you. But the instant it crushes you it also puts you back together into something real. Only the Word of God can do that.

The faith of the Israelites, the same faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was soon challenged on the shores of the Red Sea. Caught between Egyptian soldiers and the unforgiving sea, they cried out in terror to God by laying into Moses. "Why did you bring us out here to die? Better than to be slaves in Egypt than die here."

When we are faced with obstacles, it's our first thought to retreat to the imagined safety of the past. It can seem like the only alternative as we face the unknown. Normally our lives are not nearly as dramatic as crossing the Red Sea. But we are rattled by difficult crossroads or earth-shaking situations that can't seem to be resolved by anything we do or say. Maybe that sore joint, abusive relationship, addiction, unhealthy weight, declining church membership, overtaxing job, draining grudge isn't so bad, we might tell ourselves. It's better than jumping into situations like surgery, job hunting, change, reporting abuse, drugs or choice, or self-righteous anger. We too cry out to God, wondering how we will ever be able to survive the current day Pharaoh's army bearing down on us, or a sea we don't know how we'll ever cross.

Yet Moses told the panicked Hebrews to fear not, stand firm, be still, and watch God deliver you. "Fear not?" "Stand still?" "Wait upon God?" I wonder how many wanted to throttle Moses. Slavery, or death, really? Yet in desperation, they decide to step out in faith onto that dry land with walls of water on either side. The Egyptians charge with their chariots into the sea, still convinced of the superiority of their technology and power as oppressors are apt to do. Soon they find themselves mired in their arrogance, disarmed by a God who is champion of the poor and downtrodden. The slaves and the oppressed freed for a new life.

Ultimately our lives are in the hand of God who has the power and will to see us through the sea and to another place where we can breathe and know life again. It may not seem obvious, miraculous or immediate; but God is at work to bring peace and victory where we may only see defeat or dead ends. Despair will not again enslave us.

Fast forward to 1500 years later, our Gospel reading for today. “Flee to Egypt”, the angel whispers in Joseph’s ear, and they flee. Names and faces may change from Matthew’s original story, but it continues to be lived in lands throughout the world today. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were not the first refugees and they are not the last.

Picture a little boy with his parents. Violence, a tyrant ruler, an oppressive government, and the threat of death have them on the run. They have left behind more than what they have taken. I feel the parents’ fear and the knot in their stomachs. I am certain their one thought, their only priority, is to protect the child and keep him safe. I see them feeling their way through the darkness of night hoping not to be noticed. With each passing moment they are a bit further from the known and familiar, and bit closer to the unknown and unfamiliar. I hear their whispered questions. When will we get there? How much further is it? What will we find? What will it be like?

Our crossing into safety can be literal or figurative, like our crossing the Red Sea. However, it’s important to know that every crossing is unique and every crossing is valuable, no matter what we are conditioned to believe. When we deny the humanity of others, we forget the prayer that reminds us that in Jesus, God shares our humanity so that we might share God’s divinity. If that prayer means anything at all, it means that the depth and measure of God’s joy and thanksgiving that Jesus arrived in Egypt is equaled only by the depth and measure of God’s anger and sorrow that some do not reach their “Egypt.” Meaning, stories like this one confront us with our own refugee status and bring to mind the times we have fled to Egypt. Some of you may be on that road now.

If your life has ever been disrupted and you needed a safe place to get away to; if you’ve ever known it was no longer safe or good for you to stay where you were or to stay the way you were; if you’ve ever left the known and familiar and traveled in darkness to the unknown and unfamiliar; if you’ve ever realized your life was at risk and you had to make a change; if your survival depended on crossing borders into a new and foreign land; then you know what it’s like to be a refugee. And my guess is that we all know what that’s like.

We may not have had the same experience as Jesus and the Holy Family, but we share a common story and a common status. Herod is not just a king in Israel some two thousand years ago. In every age Herod is the power, circumstances, and abuses that disrupt and seek to destroy life. Herod is that one who creates refugees. For every refugee there is a Herod, and there are all sorts of refugees and all kinds of Herods.

You see, being a refugee is not only about tyrant kings, oppressive governments, and threats of death. It’s also about a deep longing and drive for a new life and a new place in life. It’s hearing and responding to the nighttime calling of God. The refugee life is neither easy nor safe but we never go alone. We go with the God of refugees, the God who “has nowhere to lay his head.” We go with the promise that our Egypt has already been sanctified and prepared by the presence of a baby. This child knows the way.

I don’t know what your refugee story is but I’ll bet you have one. I’ll bet you have had at least one time in your life when you had to get to Egypt, like your life depended on it. You left home for a better place, a different life, a new way; and you left not really knowing where you were going or what you would find when you got there.

Every time I hear today’s gospel, every time I read about refugees in today’s news, every time I reflect on my own refugee status and my times in Egypt I cannot help but wonder what if. What if Egypt had closed the borders of its heart? What if the Holy Family had arrived only to find a big wall and locked doors? What if the wannabe Pharaohs had unleashed on them the dogs of fear and prejudice? What if the Egyptian people had said, “There’s no room for you here?” What story would we be telling today? Would there be any good news for the refugees of the world? For you? For me?

But that didn’t happen. Perhaps Egypt remembered. Perhaps Egypt remembered another time, another Joseph, another refugee people. Perhaps God sent the Holy Family to a land that would remember. Perhaps God was hoping and counting on Egypt to remember it had once been a place of refuge for his people, and it could be again. Oh, that we too might remember; that we too might remember the Holy Family, and our own flights to Egypt. Oh, that we might remember it all. And we might thank the God who fights for us, today and always.

Amen.