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Church of the Holy Spirit
Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

Maybe it's the name, or perhaps it's genetic. After all, Joseph, the youngest son of Jacob, was an interpreter of dreams. It was his gift through which he saved his brothers, their families, and his father from famine after he had achieved esteemed status in Egypt with Pharaoh. Joseph, Mary's husband and Jesus' father-figure, may have been named after this Israelite ancestor and likely knew the history of the 12 Tribes of Israel, including their finding refuge in foreign places, seeking safety and sanctuary, and being inspired by dreams, which isn't unique in scripture.

It is pretty often in their history for the Israelites to be strangers in strange lands. It is so common that these stories of seeking safety in foreign lands become a central tenet of the law. We know that Joseph was a righteous man who lived according to the law. As there are approximately 36 laws in the Hebrew testament that directly address how one ought to treat those who are without a homeland, social net, or community- these people who are depending upon the translation sometimes are called: strangers, sojourners, outsiders, foreigners, wanderers, or aliens.

We know that in Matthew's account of Jesus' lineage through Joseph, we find Ruth, the Moabite, the wife of Boaz, who journeyed with Naomi, the mother of her first husband, after she became a widow, seeking sanctuary in Bethlehem. It stands

to reason that Joseph, when he is warned in the dream of impending danger, thought not only about his knowledge of his own family tree but also about the broader cultural history that there are times when it is necessary to flee and seek shelter in strange lands.

In practice, the idea of keeping those whom we love and care for, those for whom we carry the burden of responsibility, safe and secure, is not something anyone can or does take lightly. Joseph and Mary remained where they were in Bethlehem to be counted, and by the time the magi arrived, they had taken up permanent residence in or around Bethlehem. The family wouldn't have lived in the stable for months and months. We know that Joseph was a carpenter and would have been highly employable in the city. There may even have been a sense of safety with the anonymity afforded them in Bethlehem, rather than returning to the much smaller town of Galilee. That was until they learned of Herod's decree to assassinate all male children in the Davidic line.

When hiding in plain sight was no longer an option, Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Egypt. They raised him there, in exile, until the tyrant Herod died, but even when they returned, it was to Galilea, Nazareth; they did not go back to Bethlehem. How often in the history of the world have families weighed these kinds of options? It seems to me that in every family tree there are accounts of individuals who have sought safety and security for the lives of their children, elders, siblings, friends, based upon the availability of food, water, shelter, or safety,

which are impossible to access because of greed, violence, or disaster.

What is the final straw for Joseph? It is that again in a dream, he is told that this is no longer a safe option for himself, Jesus, or Mary. There is no other way. How many of our ancestors had similar dreams? I wonder how many of us will experience those kinds of moments of clarity, of messages from God that are undeniable, which require nothing of us but the ability to get up and go. To be willing to listen to God's command for us is to remember not only the needs of those we love, and respond with the knowledge and remembrance with immediacy, but also to keep in mind the times when we can provide for those we do not know, and do not yet love.

According to the Jewish tradition, Jacob himself was living in exile when he married Leah and Rachel, and eventually fathered the 12 patriarchs of the tribes of Israel- Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin. Not only did Jacob spend time in exile, but so too did Abraham, before he came into the promised land. There are times when home seems safe and sound, and times when it does not.

There are decisions I have never had to make, but I hope I would be able to listen, follow, and adhere to God's instruction, as Joseph and Mary did that night. I want to be able to say that if I had a dream that either or both of my children were at risk, that I would pack up the car, get on a plane or a boat, or do anything I could to keep them safe. I know that in making decisions about where to serve, what to do, and how to live our lives we

weigh the lives of Audrey and Owen highly - but it's not quite the same to compare school districts as to evade the destruction of an entire generation of male children, I do not know that my love for my children is the same as what Joseph and Mary took on as being the parents of God incarnate.

I do know that they did a pretty dang good job of trusting God and knowing they would find refuge in Egypt, because there was a community of displaced Jewish folk there, and they would be welcomed, cared for, and included in the community. Not only because they were Jewish, but because they knew that in the Jewish quarter they would be welcomed as any stranger would be, until they could go home or acclimate. Joseph's own experience, as well as his heritage, taught him this was the way.

Because there is nowhere that is safe for all people all the time. There is no place on earth where there are no disasters or human-caused violence. There is nowhere on the planet where it is possible to evade threats completely. When we consider that it is tempting to live in constant fear, but God commends us not to be afraid. How can we live under the constant threat of destruction, violence, hunger, thirst, illness, oppression, and not be scared?

We can trust that the law which God has written on our hearts, the law that shaped Joseph the son of Jacob, as well as Joseph the father of Jesus, the law that has been written and re-written on the hearts and minds of those who have been baptized as followers of Christ, will be that no one in this world cannot trace their ancestry back to someone who was displaced, lost, hungry, frightened or alone

in the world at one point in time. But that we are commended to love and care for those in our midst who do not have a community, a safety net, a home where they are safe, cared for, and secure. To be adopted into the household of God: means that we are all members of the family of Christ, that we are all related not through blood or marriage but by the Holy Spirit.

Because we are adopted into the household of God, we become siblings of Christ, and joint heirs in the promises that were and are given first to the Jewish people. Our adoption into the Church does not supersede, erase, or eradicate the beloved relationship between God and the Israelite people. Our adoption means that, as children of God, we become responsible for living into the law as it is written in our hearts. The love of God is universal and extends to all strangers, voyagers, wanderers, all those who have found themselves homeless, alone, and without a community to call their own.

We are called to welcome those who are unknown to us, to recognize that the scriptures we study commend us to love our neighbor, to welcome the stranger, and to comfort the afflicted. We do not know when we will be alone, alien, and abused. There is no way to avoid suffering in this life, but there are ways to alleviate it. There are ways to live like God would have us live, in unity, peace, and love. There are ways to wake up tomorrow and recognize that there are folk who, like Joseph and Mary, are trying to do nothing but keep their child and themselves safe, fed, hydrated, protected from violence, disease, or war. One way to begin that way of being is to remember that a wandering Aramean is our ancestor, as are

Ruth and Naomi, and Joseph and Rebecca, and Jacob and Leah and Rachel… and all those who in every generation choose to protect and care for those whom they love to the best of their ability. Those who dream of a better way, and who escape in pursuit of that dream, hoping they will find a way home again, either by returning or establishing a new community for themselves by being welcomed by those who were once strangers, but became friends, who were once friends but become siblings and who form a home where are all are welcome, all are loved, all are seen and heard and known and no one need be afraid.

Amen