

**EGYPT ME**  
*Sermon for Christmas 2A-Mt 2:13-15, 19-23*  
LPC, 1/5/14

One friend greeted another shortly after the latter returned from a vacation in northeastern Africa. One of the questions he asked was, “Did you like the tour guide you had in the Middle East?” “No,” said the other, “Egypt me.”

Sorry about that. There is a school of thought that holds that every sermon should begin with a joke, and that’s the only one I could call to mind about Egypt, which is what I really wanted to talk about today.

Has anyone here actually been to Egypt? I have never been. What I know about Egypt I have derived mainly from three sources: current events (it seems like Egypt is never far out of the headlines), museum displays of magnificent artifacts, and the Bible.

Egypt is prominently featured in the Bible, in both Testaments. In the Bible Egypt appears mostly as a place of refuge or of exile: sometimes both. Egypt started out as a place of refuge for the children of Israel in the book of Genesis, but became a place of exile and oppression by the time of Moses.

Those participating in the Bible Challenge have recently read the account of Israel in Egypt as presented in the Book of Exodus. When we had our discussion about this portion a couple of weeks ago, we talked about how Jesus going into Egypt with his parents, as related in this morning’s reading from Matthew, must be an intentional echo of the Exodus story.

Matthew, evidently, was born a Jew. One of the distinctive characteristics of Matthew’s Gospel is his clear intention to show Jesus as the culmination of Jewish tradition. Matthew quotes the Hebrew scripture repeatedly in relating Jesus’ story. You see that in today’s selection, where Matthew says, “This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt have I called my son.’” Matthew uses this formula, “This was to fulfill what had been spoken...” many times.

The parallel between Jesus’ Flight into Egypt and the Exodus story is bolstered by the similarity between Herod’s plan to search for and destroy the child Jesus, and Pharaoh’s plan, as related at the beginning of the book of Exodus, to kill all the Hebrew boy-babies at birth.

So, the story of the story of the Holy Family’s flight to, and return from, Egypt, as reported in this morning’s Gospel lesson taps into a rich biblical tradition. My question for you this morning is, how is this notion of flight, refuge and exile relevant to our own faith journeys today? What points in your life have been flights into Egypt? What is the equivalent of Egypt in your life? How can this metaphor help us in our own walks with God?

To help answer these questions, let’s consider what characterizes an Egypt in the biblical tradition. In the first place, Egypt is not the wilderness. Wilderness in the Bible, like Egypt, can inform our own faith journeys, but wilderness informs different parts of our faith journeys from those informed by Egypt. Wilderness is a place of wandering, uncertainty, homelessness, and a sense of being lost.

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Egypt is place people go when people already have a home they know and love, but for various reasons they have to leave and go somewhere else for a time.

Egypt, even in the days of the ancient Hebrews, was a highly civilized and cultured place. The Nile Valley was tremendously fertile and productive, especially by Middle Eastern standards. The sons of Jacob were not the only ones known to travel to Egypt in times of drought and famine. Egypt was in many ways the bread basket of the ancient near east.

So Egypt is not, unless you're a slave, a bad place to be at all. But it is decidedly different. And it's not home. For a people like the Jews who identified, and continue to identify, closely with their land, Egypt is no substitute for home no matter how lovely and lush it is.

Egypt times, unlike wilderness times, can actually be quite comfortable. There is just always a sense, in Egypt times, that this is not ultimately where we belong. This is not where we will end up. When we are in Egypt, spiritually speaking, no matter how welcome we have been made to feel, we are strangers.

So, figuratively speaking, we are in Egypt in our faith journeys when we know we are strangers for the time being. We know where we belong, spiritually, but for some reason we can't be there just now.

The time of my life that seems most like Egypt is my time at the church I served before coming to Wheeling. I needed to serve a church in or near Virginia so my youngest son could continue to pay instate tuition at UVa. I was lucky to find a position in the Washington area. There weren't many, and the atmosphere was intensely competitive. At first I was thrilled to be finally serving a church as an ordained person. But I became intensely unhappy over time. I could never identify a cause for the strength of my dissatisfaction. I just knew I was somewhere I did not, ultimately, belong. But then, I was called here, where I have always felt I belonged.

Because I have an analytical personality, ever since I left my previous position I have struggled to identify why it was that I was so very unhappy there. The idea that this was my Egypt informs and comforts me. My previous position was, after all, a refuge for me – a place to work so I didn't have to leave Virginia. There was a reason for me to be there: I needed to learn the ropes of ordained ministry in a parish with an experienced supervisor. And, it didn't last forever! God eventually led me to you.

There are three important things to remember about Egypt times. The first is that this Egypt, this not-home, is a place of refuge that God has provided. As much as we long to be home, since we can't be home right now, God is still taking care of us. The second thing is that there is a reason for us to be in Egypt, whatever form our Egypt takes. We may not know the full reason we are in Egypt, but we know part of it, and we know that our sense of exile is not for nothing. Finally, we need to know that our exile is temporary. As God brought the Holy Family out of Egypt, as Jeremiah's God promised to bring the people of Israel out of exile in Babylon with weeping and rejoicing, so God will bring us too.