

## **Sermon 01-02-2011 “Out From Bethlehem”**

**When I was living in Buffalo New York I had a Polish barber. Somehow or another on an early December day one year, we were talking about Christmas traditions. Most every family has certain traditions around Christmas that are almost sacred for that family. His situation was pretty interesting. He was Polish and his wife was Italian. Traditions for the music of the church services, the decorations, the food, the memories in the Polish community in Buffalo, and the Italian community, were very different. So in his family there were two Christmas celebrations. Everyone would go to the Polish family for Christmas Eve, and everyone would go to the Italian family on Christmas Day.**

**I think we all can remember some common ways that our wider families have celebrated Christmas down through the years. But as children grow up and go out into the world it's hard to keep up traditions—unless you're like my Polish barber in Buffalo marrying a good Italian girl. It can be heartwarming in a group of people who don't know each other very well to just ask the question, “How did your family celebrate Christmas when you were growing up?”**

**But this Sunday doesn't fit very well into our collections of Christmas traditions. You wouldn't get much help with that if I asked you, “Do you remember the last time you heard this Gospel read this morning—what happened after the three wise men left the scene after bringing their gifts to Jesus, and Joseph took his family to Egypt?” I know you wouldn't warm up a group with that kind of question. And I doubt you could recruit very many for a Christmas pageant with that story.**

**The fact is that in all my 54 years of reading the Sunday gospel of the day and preaching from that text—I don't remember ever reading this passage from Matthew in a church service until today. It's too complicated to explain why that is true, but nevertheless I must say that it's not very inspiring or heartwarming to read this passage anyway—and certainly even less so—when it's the very day after Christmas!**

**It sure doesn't sound like “Good News” It's about as exciting as stories from the Great Depression, when thrifty housewives were known to pack up the Christmas tree decorations the day after Christmas to be very sure they would not be broken before the next year.**

**What's your family tradition about taking down the Christmas tree? In my house all four of our children seemed to have something else to do, place to go, people to see, so I would mostly do it by myself while I watched the Rose Bowl parade on New Year's Day!**

**It's appropriate to be asking about Christmas traditions this morning because Christmas is full of memories for all of us. But you're not helped much if you listened carefully to the Gospel this morning, just a day after Christmas, telling of a vengeful Herod trying to find Jesus by killing all of the children in Israel two years or under.**

**That is just about as far away from what we know as the spirit of Christmas as you can get. One child got away—It was like Moses who escaped when the Pharaoh decreed that all children of Israel be killed and Moses home was passed-over-- both Moses and Jesus were saved for a new destiny. But how much comfort was this to the mothers of Bethlehem then or now?**

**30,000 children will die today around the world, mostly in Africa. But when a commercial comes on TV to give 50 cents a day to save the children, we are likely to change channels on this second day of Christmas.**

**The flight of Jesus' family into Egypt and then back to Nazareth to live as Jesus grew up, may not be part of our common traditions where Christmas is celebrated as a "wonderful time of the year" But it is a unique opportunity to hear the flight to Egypt as a Christmas story if you remember one very important thing: Even Christmas is seasoned with sadness and grief. I have seen that. You have too. So wherever we find ourselves in this time, the important thing to remember is that we are never off God's map. God has been there before. God is always ready to fill our often empty, sometimes tragic, lives.**

**Whatever the season, God has been there, done that. As the prophet Isaiah writes of the deeds of God in our first lesson this morning, "I have been their savior in distress; I have lifted them up and carried them all the days of old." Even in times that test our souls they can be handled faithfully because of Christ. Listen again to the last sentence of the passage from Hebrews this morning "Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested."**

**Now here we are this morning with a New Year just ahead, and an old year with its bittersweet memories almost behind us. In the meditations of our hearts perhaps there may be room to hold another story from the Christmas gospels: of foreign tyrants, of heavy taxes and innocent suffering and homeless holy refugees, as we wonder if the chronological New Year will really be any better than that for some of us.**

**I think it can be, if somehow we hold our griefs and sorrows in one hand, and our gratitude in the other as we bask joyfully in the Christmas promise of the holy Child that he will never leave us or forsake us, wherever life's journeys may take us.**

**For all of this morning, that is a very special Christmas gift worth remembering, and worth keeping. AMEN**