

If Not Here, Where?

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Matthew 2:13-23

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. Then what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

“A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazarene.”

The word of THE LORD. **Thanks be to God.**

One of the best gifts I've given myself this year has been my friend Michael Sperger's immersive art project, which he calls Neighborful Station. Neighborful Station is, in Michael's words, a small town big enough for all of us, and Michael has built a whole world there. There's a town map, characters, buildings, a college, businesses, there are email dispatches, and most notably, weekly podcasts, which are basically 10-minute-long guided meditations from your life as a person who has recently moved to Neighborful Station.

You go on a hike to see a rare American Chestnut tree. The town doctor pays a house call on you. You hang out at the local pizza shop. You go to the playground with equipment for children with disabilities. These podcast meditations are delivered at the Mister Rogers' pace, about 120 words per minute. They include moments for you to take a deep breath, and they are for me a beautiful oasis of earnest positivity in a media landscape made entirely of negativity and ragebait.

For example, in a recent episode about the homecoming game for the girls' soccer team at Thaddeus Stevens' High School, a 9th grader hurls a paper cup of birch beer at the visiting fans. The whole game stops, and some 11th and 12th-graders accompany the offending 9th grader over to the visiting section in order to make it right using a restorative circle. The group designates an oversized foam hand – we're #1! – as the object to hold when you want to talk – if you're not holding the foam hand, you're listening – and the guy who got soaked explains that he didn't bring a change of clothes and he wasn't looking for trouble. Noah, the 9th grader, takes the foam hand and apologizes, saying it was a dumb thing to do and that he just got carried away. The restorative circle comes to a close when you, the person listening to the podcast, you, who has just moved to town,

when you take the foam hand and suggest that both sets of fans sit together and cheer for both teams for the remainder of the game.

It is all very Mister Rogers' Neighborhood for adults, and if you're thinking this sounds schmaltzy, let me remind you that schmaltz is delicious. But it's not schmaltzy. It's beautiful. And a big part of what makes it beautiful is that Michael Sperger has a Philadelphia accent. He tries to sound non-regional, God bless him, but Michael is a Quaker from Glenside and he sounds like it. You can hear it in the Friendsgiving episode when he says "carrots" and "family." The dad who got hit with the birch beer was "embarrassed." The word "you" is used more than any other in these episodes and he's trying so hard not to pronounce it with our beautiful mid-Atlantic vowels "yoo."

Our accent is having a moment lately. Between prestige TV like "Mare of Easttown" and "Task," the relative success of our beloved sports teams, and some pretty funny social media content about eating hoagies off the top of Wawa trash cans, which, come to think of it, I don't think I've ever eaten a Wawa hoagie off any other surface in my entire life, our accent is in the culture. But it's played for laughs. Or it's shorthand for hardscrabble, tough, no BS. It's maybe even a little despairing, a little desperate.

And that's what I love about Neighborful Station. Here's the unmistakable way that we talk articulating a beautiful vision of the world as it should be. And why not? Why not us? Why don't we get to say in our own way that we dream of a certain kind of future? It's more meaningful to me to hear this vision of a peaceable kingdom in my own accent, in an accent that rarely gets to convey peace, justice, understanding, mutuality, or love. It is

not a news anchor with nonregional diction – it is good news delivered in an accent usually heard fighting over a parking spot.

Neighborful Station works because it plays on the universal and the particular. Michael dreams of a small town big enough for all of us in which anybody can listen and hear themselves there – that's the universal – but he can only convey the promise of that small town in his accent to you, the listener – that's the particular. The universal and the particular; always held in tension.

Our scripture this morning, the Christmas season in general, and really the whole Christian faith find their beauty in a similar kind of tension. We hear how King Herod was enraged to have been tricked by the magi and so he kills every child who could conceivably be the baby Jesus. We hear that this baby, born among the Israelites, finds shelter in the company of their old foes, the Egyptians. And then we hear of the particular circumstances for explaining where Jesus is really from. He comes from Nazareth, via Bethlehem, via Egypt, Bethlehem before that, and Matthew is telling this story in order to emphasize to his Jewish readers, through these explanatory callbacks, that Jesus is one of theirs. “He’s from here.”

But right from the beginning of the story, even as he is asserting that Jesus is the fulfillment of prophetic oracles from within their community, Matthew is saying that Jesus doesn’t just belong to them. Jesus also belongs to Egypt, which is a strange thing to say to a community of people for whom getting the heck up out of Egypt is one of their central founding stories. Right from the beginning, Jesus is particular, but he’s also moving outward into Egypt and greater universality.

It raises important questions for us: If God elects to be human, as we Christians believe, why on earth would he elect to be this human? Born

into this family and nation? Born at this time, under this imperial oppression? Born into these circumstances? Why does the universal ground of all being choose these particularities? He could have been a king, the world's first trillionaire, or one of his strangely named children; he could have been a reality TV star. And yet, he elected to be born humbly among a small nation, of no account among its neighbors, at a time of terrible oppression and vulnerability. And then he elected to give himself as a gift outward from there.

2,000 years later, we continue to wrestle with Christ's outward movement through the particularities of time and space right into this present moment. To read this story of the slaughter of the innocents in 2025 is to say that if Christ was a refugee fleeing oppression then, then we would probably find him today standing in line at a food bank, crossing the Darién Gap in Panama or the Mojave Desert in Arizona, clinging to a small boat in the Mediterranean or the English Channel, born among migrant workers in the Persian Gulf, or in concentration camps like CECOT, Alligator Alcatraz, or the ones "reeducating" Uyghur people in western China.

But let's be honest with ourselves: these claims do not really speak to our particularity. We, for the most part, cannot really find ourselves in that story. And preachers like me often fail to open the door for people of relative power or privilege to find themselves in the gospel story except as the bad guys. I struggle to find my place in the story when I'm not poor, when I'm not a migrant or refugee. I'm just a Roman citizen trying and often failing to be faithful.

But the good news of the gospel on this day that we read the slaughter of the innocents through Main Line eyes, through lenses of relative power

and privilege, is that we don't have to be Rome. We get to be Egypt. We get to be Egypt.

I have been to Egypt twice, one time for Christmas two years ago, and Egyptians will tell you proudly that they were the ones who sheltered the holy family when they were refugees. They don't really dwell on the whole slavery, plagues, or exodus thing. No, they were the ones who sheltered Jesus and his family when they were at their most vulnerable. The story of the slaughter of the innocents isn't just that Jesus was a refugee, although it is that; it is also that nations and communities get a chance to repent and claim another story for themselves. This is a story about a road back for Egypt – “out of Egypt I have called my son.” This is a redemption arc, an opportunity to share a vision for peace and justice in their own accent.

Far too often, people of means trying to be faithful see themselves in the gospel story as Rome, as complicit in imperial oppression or domination, or as those who, if we had the absolute power, would do things differently. We feel so close to this power, and we know that we would rain down hellfire on injustice if only we could grab it. But it's just out of reach, and so we are left in our complicity. In some ways, this is true. But it's not the whole truth.

The holy family's flight into Egypt shows there is a road back for us. There is a chance to tell another story. There is a chance to say anew that when imperial forces want to find and slaughter the Christ child born among us in 2025, that we will be Egypt, that we will, with heavy hearts, acknowledge and repent of our own history of enslavement and subjugation. But then we will commit to sheltering the most vulnerable among us, to providing a home for the Christ child born today, and to

sabotaging, undermining, lying to, and standing up to the Herods of our time. Egypt gets a road back to faithfulness, and so do we. Instead of fighting for that absolute, Roman power that we think will move the needle for good, maybe our task is simply to shelter the Christ child at his most vulnerable and, in so doing, rewrite our own story.

I don't know exactly what this looks like but telling a new story takes imagination. So, when I lose my way, I turn to my friend Michael Sperger's imagination. I immerse myself in the world of Neighborful Station: a world without medical bankruptcy, where refugee families are enfolded into the community, where God's wonderful creation is respected and stewarded, where people with disabilities get to participate, where LGBTQ people are fully included, where children are looked after by everybody. And I listen for the telltale inflections of Michael's mid-Atlantic accent.

I don't do this to withdraw from the world but to connect with the particularity and universality of the Christian story in a small town big enough for all of us. I'm reminded that Christ, the firstborn of all creation, elected to be a particular person within a particular community and then he elected us all, starting with old enemies, and he's been enfolding us ever since. We get to change, we get to be good neighbors, we get to welcome the Christ child at his most vulnerable, we get to tell another story. We don't have to be Rome – we get to be Egypt. And we get to do that with a Philly accent if we want.

Thanks be to God. Amen.