

A funny thing happened on the way home from Egypt

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Isaiah 63:7-9, Psalm 148, Hebrews 2:10-18, [Matthew 2:13-23](#)

I've long struggled with our reading this morning from the Gospel of Matthew, but not necessarily for the reason you might think. It's not because of the whole incident of the slaughter of the innocents, as horrific as that is. Unfortunately, that is the kind of thing that has happened again and again throughout the history of the world.

What I have some issues with is the end of the story. Matthew tells us that when Mary and Joseph were on their way back from Egypt where they had taken refuge from King Herod's slaughter, they made a sudden course correction.

Rerouting to Nazareth

They were heading back to their hometown in Bethlehem and they decided to redirect someplace else. **"But when Joseph 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, what is wrong with that? It does contradict the Christmas story that we know and love from the Gospel of Luke. Luke says that the family was always from Nazareth and that the only reason Jesus was born in Bethlehem was because they happened to have travelled down there for the census.

Here Matthew is saying something quite different – that the couple had always lived in Bethlehem but that, after they returned from Egypt, they made a new home in Nazareth.

You see, both gospel writers had a problem they needed to solve with their story. They knew that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, but they needed to tell a story of Jesus being born in Bethlehem because they knew that was where the Messiah had to be born.

Different Explanations

Luke solved that problem with his famous story of the census, Matthew with this story of a course change on the way back from Egypt. But none of that is what I have a problem with. I get that the gospel writers' main concern was not to get all of the historical details of Jesus right.

They wanted to make sure that they got the important theological truths about Jesus across and as long as they could tell a story where Jesus was born in Bethlehem and came from Nazareth, they were not concerned that all the details of how that happened were correct.

A Lame Explanation

The problem that I have is this: Matthew's explanation is kind of lame. He says that Joseph didn't want to return to Bethlehem because Archelaus, the son of Herod the Great, was ruling there. That much makes perfect sense. Herod had tried to kill the boy!

It's the part about him choosing – indeed, being led by God – to go to Nazareth instead that bothers me. Because guess who was ruling over Nazareth: Herod Antipas, who was *also* the son of Herod the Great and the full brother of Archelaus. If he was trying to avoid dealing with a son of Herod, Nazareth was about the last place Joseph wanted to be.

Is Matthew a Bad Writer?

So, that's my problem with this story. It seems to be



such a weak explanation for why they ended up in Nazareth. Either Matthew was ignorant of the fact that Herod Antipas was also the son of Herod the Great or, worse, he was aware of it, and he was just hoping that his readers wouldn't notice. That's the kind of thing that makes me lose respect for a writer.

But I have been giving that a lot of thought lately. I think that Matthew is a better writer than that. He is not ignorant of basic history, and he always respects his readers. So, I actually think I've been unfair to old Matthew. And perhaps, if I give him the benefit of the doubt, I will discover that there is more to this odd decision to divert to Nazareth than meets the eye. What are we supposed to imagine that the story really was?

“Are we There Yet?”

Travelling along the King's Highway that led up the coast of the Mediterranean from Egypt was exhausting at the best of times, but it was doubly so when traveling with a toddler. “Are we there yet? Are we there yet?” Jesus would ask until Joseph started to feel his sanity fray. What could he say but that there were still many days yet to go?

He didn't blame the boy for being in a hurry. How many times had he told Jesus the stories of his hometown, of the house that he had been born in and the noble family that he belonged to. Of course, Jesus was eager to be there.

Doubts

But, the closer they got, the more doubts Joseph felt. They had fled from Bethlehem in Judah in such fear and disarray that he couldn't help but feel anxiety at the prospect of returning.

True, Herod the Tyrant, the man who had tried to kill the boy (and succeeded in killing so many others) was dead. That news had been what had prompted him to even think of returning in the first place. The decision had been affirmed in another of those strange dreams that had unerringly led Joseph throughout this whole ordeal, so of course they had packed up and headed out.

But the news that they had picked up on the road had been less reassuring. The word was that Herod had bequeathed the rule of Judea to his son, Archelaus. That in itself was hardly surprising. Of course, Herod would have wanted to keep his kingdom in the family.

Archelaus Reveals his Character

It was the news about the character of this particular son that was alarming. Archelaus had not yet taken up his throne. Before that could happen, he would have to go to Rome to seek the Emperor's approval.

But even as he prepared to leave, there had been a massive protest in the temple. The people demanded that those who had carried out some of his father's worst atrocities be punished. Archelaus appeared before the people and promised that their concerns would be addressed.

But then he left and started drinking with his friends. A few hours later Archelaus had ordered the legions to enter into the temple where the protestors were still waiting for their demands to be met. The reports were that some 3000 of them were murdered when they refused to leave.

It really was not seeming as if the apple had not fallen too far from the tree when it came to Herod's son, Archelaus.

Indecision

Joseph was tormented with indecision. Every step he was taking brought him closer to Judea and seemingly to the clutches of the son of Herod. Should he stop? Should he turn around? Had the dreams finally failed him?

More news from Judea was spreading. It seemed that Archelaus had now left Judea for Rome where he would plead with the emperor to receive his kingdom. But he was not the only one who was going!

Remarkable Opposition

Here was the surprising part. It seemed that a lot of people had decided that Archelaus would not make a very good king. It might have had something to do with those 3,000 dead bodies in the temple. That rulers have opponents is not necessarily news. You get into a position of power, and I can almost guarantee that someone will hate you for it.

What was really astonishing in this case was that people were doing something about it. An entire delegation had set sail for Rome to stand in opposition to the very idea of Archelaus receiving his kingdom. And here was the really amazing part, his biggest opponent was none other than Archelaus' own brother Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee. He was going to stand before the emperor and tell him that his own brother must never be king.

When Joseph heard that, it made his head spin. He was used to a world in which powerful people just got their way, in which no one would speak up to those who had power and demand that they do better. Was it possible that Herod Antipas was different? Could he actually be the kind of ruler that cared for his people?

A Late Night Talk

That night, once they had managed to get the boy to sleep, Mary and Joseph sat up late discussing the difficult choice that was before them. Joseph laid out all of his concerns to his wife who immediately understood, as she had been hearing all of the same rumours and stories that he had.

She, like any mother, had strong feelings about the need to protect her only son. "We already know that this Archelaus is the same kind of monster that his father was. He has shown it to the world. I don't want to live away from Bethlehem – away from my family and yours. I don't want to lose the house you built for us there either. But I will never feel safe if I know that Jesus is within the reach of a man like Archelaus.

"But I also know that Jesus has to be raised among his people and so I am not willing to go further afield than Galilee where I've heard there are many Jewish communities."

"But what of the Herod who now rules there?" Joseph wondered. "He is no less a son of the Tyrant. How can we know that Jesus will be safe from him?"

"We can't," Mary admitted. "But if he opposes his brother, who does such horrible things, how can he be worse than him?"

A Confirming Dream

Joseph at least felt better for having finally been able to put his concerns into words, but he still felt unsure about what to do as he prepared to sleep that night. Mary's words had at least made him feel as if they might find a way through all of this. As he drifted off to sleep, it was Mary's words, "how can he be worse?" that echoed through his mind.

He didn't recall what he dreamt that night, but when he awoke, he just felt better about the Galilean option. And so, when the family finally arrived within bounds of Archelaus' kingdom, they turned away from the main body of travelers (most of whom were heading toward Jerusalem) towards the north.

Nazareth

Nazareth was not a big place. It was little more than a village of maybe a couple hundred families in the Galilean hills. Surely no one, least of all the officials of Herod Antipas, would notice them in such a place.

Nazareth was small, but it was only a few hours away from the city of Sepphoris. That also recommended it. Sepphoris was Herod's new capital, but he had only just named it as such, and it was still under construction. Joseph would be able to get work there on the various worksites. Even better, he

could probably work under the table and there would be no documentation. It wouldn't pay well, but hopefully they would manage to get by.

How the Choice Worked Out

They were right about Archelaus, of course. His rule over Judea quickly went from bad to worse and they often heard reports of his cruelty even in Nazareth. So extreme was his evil that, by the time that Jesus came to the age when he was responsible to keep the law, the Romans had taken his kingdom from him and exiled him far away in the west.

I wish I could say that Herod Antipas was better, and maybe he was from the Roman point of view. But he was hardly lacking in his own evil and cruelty. When John the Baptist spoke against him, he did not hesitate to arrest him and then take off his head. And when, eventually, Jesus did capture his attention, he vowed to kill him too. Of course, he wouldn't get the chance, but that is another story.

So, I'm not entirely sure that Mary and Joseph's choice worked out for the reasons that they had in mind. But, you know how it is, you have to make a choice because you are forced to. Somehow, it seems, the choices that we make have a way of working their own way out.

A Story for the New Year

It seemed to me that this story in the Gospel of Matthew was a good one to start a new year with. January is a time when people tend to look forward and look back and try to make the choices and resolutions that will set them on a good path for the future. That is all well and good, but we sometimes think that such decisions have higher stakes than they really do – as if our very lives depend on getting the choice right.

We feel like we are deciding between living under the evil King Archelaus or under the wise and good Herod Antipas. At first glance, the choice may seem that stark, but if you dig into the choice (just like if you dig into this story about the return from Egypt) it is rarely so clear.

People who Threaten to Move Away

We live in a world where we, like Mary and Joseph, feel as if we have little control over who will be in charge. You see that, for example, when people say things like "If Trump becomes President, I'm moving to Canada." Or (here in Canada) when people say, "If Pierre Poilievre becomes Prime Minister (or maybe if Trudeau gets in again), I'm moving to the U.S." People rarely do it, of course, because they don't actually mean it. It is just a way of saying that you feel powerless about something.

Well Mary and Joseph did it – or at least Matthew tells us that they did. And I think that what Matthew may be really saying is that, even if their choice was based on insufficient information and so wasn't really the choice that they thought it was, they were under the care of someone who not only had better information, but also had a plan to make it all work out.

Choices

Make your choices the best you can. That is all that any of us can do. But when you choose, don't torture yourself over the options that you rejected. That doesn't serve anyone well. Go forward with confidence, or to use another word for the same thing, with faith. Sure, things probably won't work out exactly as you anticipated, but maybe they'll lead to something magnificent that you never planned on.