

January 4, 2026

Second Sunday after Christmas

St Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH

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The Episcopal Diocese of Ohio

I bring greetings on this second Sunday after Christmas from Bishop Anne and the rest of the Bishop's staff. I'm Rosalind Hughes, Canon for Beloved Community, and it is a joy to be with you during this holy and wonder-filled season as we continue to celebrate God's incarnation among us.

Today, we pick up the story after the wise men, the magi have visited Bethlehem with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, and after they have accidentally alerted Herod that there is something seismic happening among the people, affecting even the heavens, with the appearance of a bright new star.

Warned in a dream not to return to Herod, having paid homage to the holy family and to Jesus, they have left for their own country by another road.

Have you ever had one of those dreams that was so vivid and lifelike that when you woke up you weren't altogether certain it was a dream? The dreams that make you reach for the phone just to check in with a loved one, or to look out for the promised sign on the way to work, sure that God is speaking through the birds and the bystanders?

Joseph, too, was a dreamer, and it served him well. As he made the cruel and arduous journey toward Egypt, surrounded no doubt by other refugees from Herod's atrocity, I wonder if he remembered the stories of his namesake, Joseph the dreamer, with the coat of many colours, and the brothers, and the exile to Egypt, the imprisonment, and the eventual redemption. I wonder if this Joseph remembered that Joseph's words to his brothers as they fretted over his forgiveness: what you intended as evil toward me, God has repurposed for good toward all, for the saving and sustaining of many people.

It is not God's will that people should do evil. It is not in God's nature to create chaos, but to bring comfort to God's people, mercy to the lost, love to those most in need of it. The backstory of this flight to Egypt is one of the most awful examples of evil in the Christian canon – yet the message of Matthew's gospel is not one of humanity's horrors but of God's persistent and providential love and mercy. The warning to Joseph to flee comes even before the order of Herod to kill. The message to Joseph, through his dreams, through his faith, is that no matter how hard it becomes to see it, the grace and protective love of God surround this holy family, that God is with us: Emmanuel.

The inhumanity in this story belongs to us alone: to humans jealous of their power and influence, drunk on the dregs of empire and determined to hold on to whatever worldly rewards that they can. Herod, fearful of the interventions of God to redeem God's people, to remake the world in the image of the kingdom of God, goes to unimaginable lengths to resist that vision, that mercy, that light.

But you don't have to be Herod to resist the call of God's kingdom. A little hoarding here, a little envy there. The ranking of those deserving and undeserving of help, of dignity, of a home and safety and love. The temptations of the human heart to choose hardness are legendary. How many of our new year's resolutions have to do with maintaining or improving our own status, rather than easing the way of others?

If we saw the holy family fleeing violence in their homeland, on the run with whatever they could muster, surrounded by fellow refugees, fueled by nothing more than fear, faith, and dreams – would we find room for them?

No, God does not cause harm to happen – we are well equipped to do that for ourselves – but God does give us the opportunity to participate in the healing of our humanity, the repairing of the breach, the resistance of evil, the resurrection of hope. What one intends for evil, we can, with God's help, turn toward something better.

And, that said, as I suspect many of us are, I am still processing the news of this weekend, how this world seems addicted to war, despite the angels songs of peace on earth; how we can remain and act on the side of the angels when all around is on fire.

But I would be remiss today if I didn't bring us back, just for a moment, to another character in this Christmas story, unnamed in Matthew's gospel, but hovering always in the background, in dreams and in visions and over the shepherds' fields.

Because if we make the bold assumption that the same angel who visited Zechariah and Mary to announce the births of John and Jesus was the same angel who visited Joseph in his dreams, reassuring him of the baby to be born, warning him to flee and bringing him home, well, then we know that that was the archangel, Gabriel.

Gabriel is implicated in dreams and visions, going back at least to the time of the prophet Daniel. He is by turns an interpreter, a powerful messenger, and a gentle encourager. He is faithful in his care for the holy family, returning again and again to Joseph's dreams to help him find his way forward. Who knows how many others were saved, when Joseph shared his dreams with his neighbours, warning them, too, to flee the extravagant evil of Herod's decree?

And while we're thinking of Gabriel, we cannot but acknowledge his namesake, who was ordained a priest here among you all, who has served you so well, and who will continue his priestly ministry among us, the church, with another congregation, in another place, but with the same message of God's providential love and mercy and grace, just as you will continue your ministry here, sharing the transformative love of Jesus. (In fact, I think the next time I will be here with you will be to celebrate your continuing ministry together with your new rector, T.J.)

In all of these journeys, with their twists and turns and aching feet, the partings of ways and magnificent views, God is with us, and we are members with one another of the Body of God's Christ.

And so we are called to continue wherever we find ourselves to echo what we have heard from angels and from one another, and from the birth of Jesus himself: that God's love is more powerful, more persistent, more present than the work of empire, and worth more than any amount of gold, frankincense, or myrrh. Because despite the siren songs of the world, despite even the wail of the air raid sirens, we do know when it is God who is speaking to us. We have heard the angels singing peace. We know the dreams are real.

We are sustained by the same love that supported Joseph, and when there are disruptions or upheavals, whether excitedly anticipated or wildly unexpected turns, it is the same providence that visits us, and lets us know that God is with us in it all: Emmanuel.

That was the vision in which Joseph placed his faith and his family: that God is with us, God's promises endure forever. It didn't make life easier, by any means. God knows it didn't remove the obstacles of grief and the graft and grimness of the world or the wilderness, its empires, its little kings.

But what it did mean is that he, Joseph, spent the rest of his days in the close and intimate presence of the love of God among us, Jesus. And who knows how many were saved, through one man's dream, and courage, and faith, who listened to the Word of God crying in the night and heard *and heeded* the voice of God among us, the kingdom of heaven drawn near.

Amen.