

OUT OF EGYPT

Matthew 2:13-23

Out of Egypt

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If you were in church a couple of weeks ago in the midst of our first bad spell of weather, I congratulate you. You would have attended the annual Christmas pageant, and you would have heard the two characters, Matt and Lucy become hopelessly confused. One was given a script based on Luke's Nativity story while the other, was given Matthew's. Some choice dialogue illustrated the differences between the two scriptures. "Where did those Wise Men come from? They aren't in my script." "There are animals all around me. Who let the animals in?" "Shepherds! There are no shepherds in my script!" "There is no star in mine." "What's going on?"

All that is familiar to us in the crèche, on Christmas Cards, in our beloved Carols and in our imaginations is a weaving together of two very different Nativity stories with two very different themes. Matthew has drawn on the Exodus story to portray Jesus as the liberator/king, the new Moses, who will save or redeem us and bring us to his kingdom.

Luke, on the other hand, describes a child born into poverty surrounded by shepherds. His words recall the great King David who was born into a shepherd family and called by God to kingship. There are hosts of angels in Luke, singing praise for the child of Bethlehem. That this is a child of both heaven and earth is illustrated in those hosts of angels singing to an audience of simple shepherds. There is, however, only one angel in Matthew who whispers to Joseph in his dreams. Through that messenger, God directs the child and his parents to refuge in Egypt, and when the threat is over, the angel calls them out of Egypt and sends them home to a place of safety.

"Out of Egypt." I kept saying to myself as I reflected on Matthew's nativity story. I found something compelling in those words. Egypt is a geographic place that has been in existence for thousands of years. Right now, it is often in the headlines as a place of unsettling political change. So it is both ancient and as contemporary as the human desire to achieve political stability. But equally ancient words describe the yearning of a people seeking a place to call home. Moses, born into slavery in Egypt, growing into adulthood as an adopted son of the oppressors, running for safety into the desert, returning to lead his people out of Egypt and toward the promised land is the story of Exodus. Ancient and now, 'Out of Egypt' is always the quest for the promised land, the place of stability and rootedness.

As I kept repeating those words, "out of Egypt," I began to define for myself, a symbolic meaning that gives expression to all those moments of uplifting joy or soul wrenching pain that are a part of every human life. Egypt was a place of safe refuge for Mary and Joseph. Egypt, the metaphor for a place or a state apart is what resonates in my imagination and in my spirit. We all have been or will be temporary residents in this Egypt of the soul more than one time in our lives.

I remember clearly my first experience in 'Egypt.' When my mother died, my family gathered together there in our grieving and found it to be a place of emotional extremes. We laughed and we cried in the circle of our mutual pain. As we left the church following

the funeral, I glanced at cars going by and of people walking their dogs on the sidewalks and of children at recess in the school across the street. I wondered why all of those people were living a normal life when my own life had so drastically changed. Would life ever be normal again? And we gathered closer in our family 'Egypt' for a few more days, but Egypt was not forever. One by one we left that place of temporary emotional safety and returned to 'normalcy' within the world of work and obligations, of raising children, of drying tears and pain free laughter. Egypt faded into that quiet hidden place in the soul, to be called upon again only in case of emergency. And it was called forth again when, just a few years later, my father died. Once again, Egypt was a safe haven in which we could relax into our grief.

Egypt takes many forms. It is the much needed vacation that provides rest, renewal and time without duties, chores or responsibilities. Out of Egypt, one returns to the stress and challenge of daily life with renewed energy and strength to meet the challenges. Egypt is the blessed relief of sleep during a time of all consuming worry that leaves one tossing and turning with an overactive brain causing both worry and fatigue. Waking to a new morning may be accompanied by a solution to the problem or the waking out of Egypt may simply be a refreshed brain ready to confront the root of the worry. Egypt, for numbers of people is the daily time they take for meditation. Be it 10 minutes or an hour, those moments are times of unfolding of the spirit and welcoming into one's consciousness, peace and strength in preparation for the day's surprises.

Egypt can take the form of group meetings and, in fact, is a gift to those who struggle with deep rooted challenges. Occasionally, we staff find complications between our schedule and that of one or more of the AA meetings that take place weekly. It is easy to slip into resentment over the use of the building. But this is the echo coming from the world of normal. Those who are members of the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous find their security in their weekly meetings. In an hour meeting one or more days each week, those folks find coping skills, support and the courage to 'go out of Egypt' and into *normal* with strength and perseverance. Particularly during this season from Christmas to New Years, the Egypt of AA is a life line. The fun of the season is in parties and family gatherings, most of which are threaded through with wine or spiked egg nog or mixed drinks. Toasts are made. Conversations are peppered through with laughter amid the smells of beer. Guests are encouraged to drink by hosts wanting to ensure that all have a good time. Out of Egypt is a hard place to be when one is confronted with normalcy that can kill. That is why those meetings are life savers.

Egypt, for Mary and Joseph, meant a time of safety and healing following the devastating drive of Herod to annihilate any contender to his throne. When it was safe to return home, Joseph and Mary made the choice to go as far away from Herod's dominion as they could and so, went north to Nazareth. When we have been in our various Egypts, we return to normal with choices to be made. How do we continue to live each day? Are there changes we should make? Is there a different path we should take into our future? Is there continued healing that should take place? Should we carve out more time to relax and celebrate the beauty and mystery of life, of family, of enduring friendships? Egypt should not be an end but a beginning and also, a way station on the roads we travel. All of those Egypts we pass into and come out of are affirmations of life. They are not meant to hold us down but to give us what we need and send us on our way. They are a blessing given by our God of love who heals and restores, refreshes and enlivens. In the end, it is the voice

of God who calls us out of Egypt and into life with all its challenges and joys. We trust, knowing that when we need it, Egypt will be there waiting.

Poet Mary Oliver has found her sense of the divine in the beauty and mystery of nature. In this piece, Wild Geese, she reminds us of who we are, of whose we are and our grounding in the normal that is found in God's glorious creation.

WILD GEESE By: Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

