

Flight into Egypt

[Jeremiah 31:7-14](#)

[Matthew 2:13-15,19-23](#)

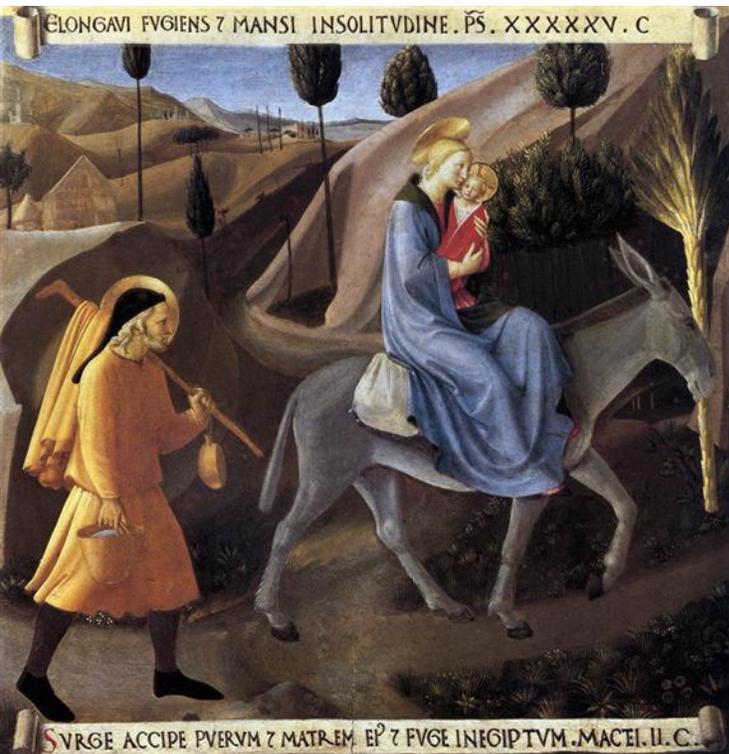
This week we read the narrative of the Gospel of Matthew, not to hear a story of Jesus, Mary and the shepherds, but to re-enter Joseph's story and his role of protecting the baby Jesus and his mother in a dangerous world of Roman occupation and power. The story of Christmas has a dark and dangerous side for the One who is called to subvert the powerful and to be with the oppressed. This section of Matthew's Gospel emphasizes the God who protects the child--- God with us---"Emmanuel" and lays out a prophetic pattern that we also see in the passion narrative, the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Christmas story points toward salvation; we know the story/prophesies/saving history from the Hebrew Scriptures and look toward salvation as we experience it with the resurrection of Jesus.



Giotto, 1304-1306, Italy

Having paid homage to the infant Jesus, the wise men "return home by another way" and still Herod's anger seethes and he tries to find the child. In a dream, an angel warns Joseph that Herod threatens the life of Jesus and Joseph flees from Bethlehem to Egypt. We hear in the narrative an account that parallels the story of Moses: saved as a child, he leads his people out of slavery in Egypt into freedom. Moses is given the gift of the Law and the Commandments for God's people, just as Jesus will be the salvation of the people. In the section of the Gospel that we do not read in church on Sunday, fear motivates Herod and he seeks the child who will be king, killing all the children under two around Bethlehem. Although this is not documented in contemporary histories of Herod, Herod was known to be especially brutal to anyone, including family who threatened him.



Fra Angelico, 1451-52, Florence

Matthew quotes Jeremiah and laments for all the children whose lives are lost. Matthew wants us to know that Jesus's story is also the story of the people of Israel, and that God protects Jesus, like Moses, even as a child, through Joseph. Joseph, with the power of God walks the path of God with Jesus.

While living in Egypt, a place where refugees flee (think—*Jacob and the Technicolor Dream Coat* and God saving the people from famine) an angel announces to Joseph that Herod is dead. Joseph leaves Egypt and travels to Nazareth; there Jesus is raised as a child, also fulfilling the prophecy that Jesus will be called a Nazarene.



Lorenzo, Monaco, 1370-1425, German

Today's narrative has inspired many artists who place Jesus in the arms of his mother or mother, father and child, huddled against the cold as they travel to a strange place. Sometimes it appears that Jesus travels on the back of a donkey in his mother's arms, pointing toward the journey into Jerusalem when Jesus will be put to death; sometimes Mary leads. In other artist's meditations Joseph walks ahead of Mary, carrying a shepherd's staff.



Rest on the flight into Egypt;
Nicholas Mynheer, 2000

Artists often use contemporary understandings of the journey of the Holy Family who have suddenly become refugees running for fear of their lives. The images remind us not only of the quiet sleeping Jesus, protected by the warm breath of the animal in stable, but of the turbulence of being uprooted and steady faith in God. This is Hope.

Refugees: La Sagrada Familia; Kelly Latimore; 2016

I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow...

Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more. Jeremiah 31:13,15

