

Sunday, December 26, 2010: Matthew 2:13-23

by [Fred Craddock](#) in the [December 14, 2010](#) issue

Today is December 26. It is still Christmas and it will be until January 6. My mother did not think so. On the evening of December 25 she tossed the tree, put away the decorations, fed the family the leftovers and announced it was 365 days until Christmas. For her the Depression stole Christmas, widening the gulf between those who have and those who do not.

Today is Christmas, and so is tomorrow and tomorrow for 12 days. We need every day of it to reflect on what God has done among us. "Emmanuel," says Matthew. "God is with us." Judging by the careful attention he gives to it, Matthew must have loved this season. Our text is but a slice of the story, but 2:13-23 is pregnant with remembrances of Israel's past: the saga of Joseph the dreamer in Egypt, the violent pharaoh, the rescue of the infant Moses, the lament of mother Rachel, the exodus from Egypt and the arrival of the holy family in the promised land. The narrative is carefully framed in three sections, each concluding with a quotation of scripture (verses 15, 17-18, 23), but the passage is doubly enriched by allusions to and echoes of Israel's history and hope. A refrain, "the child and his mother" (repeated four times after verse 11), holds the narrative together, makes it easy to remember and repeat, and moves the reader with the image of faithful Joseph keeping the family safe by his obedience to the will of God. Almost incidentally, Matthew is able to answer the persistent question: how could one born in Bethlehem of Judea become Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee?

The entirety of Matthew 2:13-23 is set in motion by the event of 2:1-12, the coming of wise men from the east to Jerusalem. This event is told in the manner of an antiestablishment story, a peasant-versus-king story, a story protesting abuses by the powerful against the powerless. These stories can be found in every culture. Early American colonists, smarting under the heel of King George III, delighted in reciting, "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall; Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the king's horses and all the king's men could not put Humpty Dumpty together again." One can imagine camel drivers around an evening fire enjoying their hatred of Herod.

Matthew's story begins almost humorously: magi come to Herod's city asking the way to the newborn king. You do not ask the king, "Where's the king?" The city is in turmoil; Herod's throne is in question. But Matthew's point is clear: there are two kings; there are two kingdoms, one of violence, one of peace. Violence has its sword drawn against peace, but at every turn, Herod's attempt to destroy Jesus is thwarted by the will of God revealed to and carried out by Joseph. There is no reason to believe that the death of Herod will end the chase. After Herod comes Herod Archelaus, after Herod Archelaus comes another Herod, and another and another. The reader of Matthew will want, therefore, to follow the theme of two kings, two kingdoms to the end of the story.

In fact, we might well take a little time to observe the unfolding of the drama that began at Christmas. The pattern is set: Jesus the King of Peace retreats before Herod the King of Violence. At first, the decision is Joseph's: from Judea to Egypt, then from Egypt to Judea, and finally from Judea to Nazareth in Galilee.

When the narrative continues, Jesus is an adult; what happens to the pattern of threat and retreat now that Jesus is ready to announce the coming of God's kingdom? The old threat reappears: Herod Antipas arrests John the Baptist. In the Jordan Valley, Jesus hears of John's arrest and retreats to Galilee. He moves his home from Nazareth to Capernaum and makes teaching and healing tours. Success is interrupted by a conspiracy to kill him. Jesus retreats, asking the crowd not to reveal his whereabouts. John is executed, and Jesus retreats alone in a boat to a deserted place. Soon comes a verbal clash with a delegation from Jerusalem. Again Jesus retreats, this time to the north, near Tyre and Sidon. He returns to Israel only to be interrogated by leaders of the religious establishment. He withdraws again, but begins to tell his disciples he must go to Jerusalem. Perhaps now he will draw a line in the sand; no more retreat.

At his arrest one of his disciples resorts to violence. Jesus says no: If I wanted, God would send 12 legions of angels to fight for me. He could have, but he didn't. Maybe at Golgotha he will call down divine power and destroy his enemies. He could have, but he didn't.

There is no power like the power of restraint, and there is no restraint like the restraint of love.