

January 1, First Sunday after Christmas Day: Matthew 2:13-23

by [Melissa Earley](#) in the [December 7, 2016](#) issue

*The little sneak got away* is my first thought after reading this story of the flight into Egypt. Jesus got away. All those other boy babies didn't.

Mary and Joseph hear Jesus' hunger cries, his babbling, and then his first words. They cheer when Jesus pulls himself up for the first time. They clap and hold their palms open to urge him to toddle toward them on unsteady feet. They delight in his delight at the shadows of the fig leaves on the floor of their house in the late afternoon. They sing him lullabies and play patty-cake. They gaze at him with wonder, not because he is the Messiah but because he is their son. Jesus is spared. All those other families are wrecked.

"God abandoned him," Liz said. Liz and I were standing beside the hospital bed of her 55-year-old husband Frederic. Frederic had woken early that morning, left his wife sleeping in bed beside the warm imprint from his body, gone to the furnace room of their basement, and put a rope over an exposed beam. When Liz woke up she went to the kitchen and heard Frederic in the basement. She called to him. Frederic came part way up the stairs, shielding from her view the white length of rope. He told her he was just going through some old boxes.

Later, when he didn't come upstairs, Liz went down and found him. She put her arms around him, trying to lift him to relieve the pressure from his neck. He was too heavy. She couldn't lift him up or get him down. In order to call for help, Liz had to let him go. She had to let him go and then run up the stairs and rummage through her purse, pushing aside keys and wallet and Kleenex to find her phone.

When the paramedics arrived, they resuscitated Frederic. Now he was on life support in the intensive care unit. Family and intimate friends claimed the waiting room as their own. Waves of other friends came through to offer hugs, support, and snacks. Different groups huddled around Frederic's bed telling stories about him, stories that ended in ripples of laughter, which in turn ended with a catch in the throat as we realized where we were.

In a gap between visitors, Liz and I were alone in Frederic's room. She stood by the head of the bed. She stroked his cheek, swept his hair off his forehead, caressed his arm, grabbed hold of his hand. "God abandoned him," she said.

"Yes," I said. "God did." I wasn't trying to mirror Liz's feelings back to her or affirm her experience. I didn't have a pastoral strategy in mind or a scripture text at the ready. I said yes because I believed it to be true.

There are some who have told me that God wasn't absent that day—that God only seemed to be gone, a kind of stage magician's trick, or like a parent out of sight of a crying baby. They tell me the story of the boy on the vision quest who is blindfolded and afraid and then finds out in the morning that his father was always there. Maybe. But this sort of absence feels like the absence of a stolen child or a dead parent or a runaway lover. We keep expecting the loved one to show up again and erase the pain of our current circumstance. We keep being disappointed.

Jesus escapes; the innocents are slaughtered. We can't talk about the one without acknowledging the other. Four days after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, Diana Butler Bass wrote a piece for *Day 1* asking the question, Where was God in Newtown? Bass suggests that God was neither absent nor present—God was hidden. She writes,

As answers go, the hidden God will not completely satisfy and can never get to questions of motive. Isn't that the point? Somewhere, deep in our souls, we know we cannot know. The hidden God, I think, is the only God that makes any sense of Newtown: One neither and both present and absent; One in the hands of rescuers but not the hands that wielded the guns; One in the midst of murdered but not the act of murder. This is the God who is in all places and nowhere.

I can come to terms with a God who respects our free will, even if that means not saving the babies. I don't really expect Jesus to be some kind of baby superhero who shoots Herod with flaming darts out of his eyes and vanquishes Herod's army to a triumphant musical score. What troubles me is that in Jesus, God runs away. God abandons all those other babies. God acts to save one baby, and in some way beyond what I can really grasp, that baby is God. God saves his own skin and escapes unscathed.

It's not God's vulnerability that is difficult, but rather God's self-protection. And not just from the swords of Herod's army. Where is God when all those parents are weeping? Is God hidden or hiding?

Liz and I stood beside Frederic's bed for several minutes. She stroked Frederic's face and arm and leg. She leaned down and kissed him on the cheek and whispered in his ear. I stood vigil.

Liz turned to me and said, "Where's Frederic?" I said, "With God."