

McCabe United Methodist Church

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Matthew 2:13-22

“Before Next Year Comes!”

Pastor Art Scanson

Tom Ervin, Professor of Music at the University of Arizona was attending a conference for music teachers in New York. While at the conference he purchased a talking metronome. A metronome is a device for counting the beats in a song. Before Tom and his son boarded their plane to go home, Tom placed his carry-on bag on the security-check conveyor.

The security guard's eyes widened as he watched the monitor. He asked Tom what he had in the bag. Then the guard slowly pulled out of the bag this strange looking device. This six-by-three-inch black box with dials and switches. Sensing trouble the other travelers quickly vacated the area.

“It's a metronome,” Tom replied weakly, as his son cringed with embarrassment. “It's a talking metronome,” he insisted. “Look, I'll show you.”

And so with having no idea for sure how it worked he flipped a switch. “One. . .two. . .three. . .four,” said the metronome in perfect time. With that everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

As they were putting their things together, Tom's son whispered to his dad, “Aren't you glad it didn't go ‘four. . .three. . .two. . .one?’”

We have just spent Advent counting down the weeks and days to Christmas. Next come New Years. But before next year comes, I would like to suggest we linger a little longer with Mary and Joseph because so often we forget what happened right after the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. It is a stark reminder of the world in which we live.

In 1840, William Craft of Macon, GA. made the mistake of falling in love. Well what's wrong with falling in love,” you ask? Well, William Craft was a slave and it was against the law for slaves to marry. But William and his beloved friend, Ellen, did marry in a secret ceremony in 1846. Afterward, they lived in constant fear of being sold off and then separated. Two years later, William and Ellen decided they would make a break for freedom.

It was before Christmas that year when William and Ellen planned their escape. Ellen was a light-skinned person that could easily pass for a white person. So she disguised herself as a white man and William passed as her servant. On Christmas morning 1848, William and Ellen Craft arrived in Philadelphia just in time to watch the sunrise from the steps of Independence Hall. They were finally free. (Webb Garrison. *A Treasury of Christmas Stories* Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press 1990)

Think of this together with Mary and Joseph's flight into Egypt. Read Scripture Lesson - Matthew 2:13-15; 19-22.

We who live in freedom and prosperity find it hard to understand the terror that must have been in Mary and Joseph's hearts as they fled Herod. Let alone have any understanding what it is to be a refugee in a strange land. Yet, there are millions of people in this land who do know. Many, like Mary and Joseph, have fled political persecution. Others have come, much like our ancestors, seeking a better life. I believe there are some lessons for us as we close out one year and move into the next.

There are no promises in Scripture that God's elect will have a smooth road. You might say to me, “Well that's obvious.” But is it? There are movements around this country, as well as churches that purpose material and political success for those who follow Jesus. For example, isn't this what was suggested in the little book *The Prayer of Jabez*? It is an idea that

gets a following - that book sold more than 7 million copies. Thinking that just by finding a secret formula in Scripture they are going to have it all.

If that idea were presented to Mary and Joseph, they would laugh at you. It is no fun being a refugee in any land, in any time. Travel is hard anytime, let alone on foot with a donkey and an infant. We are uncomfortable when a baby cries a few minutes on a plane flight. Imagine traveling for weeks by foot or on a donkey carrying a newborn baby. Remember, there were no pampers, no laundromats to wash diapers or clothes. No restaurant, no microwaves to quickly get something to eat. No quick flight to Cairo with a Hilton to stay in for a good night's sleep. Only the long and dusty roads. Obviously, life was unimaginably hard for them—just as it has been for millions of believers in Christ since then. So if you think that giving your life to Jesus will make all your problems disappear, it probably isn't going to happen. In fact, if you are a follower of Jesus, you will probably have real problems like other people. You may just have to suffer because of your Christian commitment.

The Good News is, **we are promised that God will always be with us when we follow Jesus.** Do you think that Mary and Joseph were alone in Egypt? Not on your life! You can be sure God's watchful eye was always upon them. There were dark days, difficult days, but God had led them into Egypt and they knew that when it was time to leave - God led them back to Nazareth. During that time, Mary and Joseph clung to one another, they clung to their faith, and they clung to their tiny baby.

Why? Because they had already been through a great deal - a mysterious pregnancy—giving birth in a stable—the visit of the shepherds and the magi—the angel telling them they could not return to Nazareth. But through it all they trusted God. They were not about to give up now. This brings us to the final thing I want to note: **They did see the promises of God fulfilled in their lives.**

Not only had life been hard for them. Now it would get worse in the years to come. Their precious baby son, this Jesus, would die on a cross like a common criminal. Still, they knew that the promises of God were sure. They would be able to lean on the Rock that would not fail. Yes, God's promises are not like our promises.

After an evening out, some parents returned home to find their children in bed asleep. The baby-sitter had gotten them to bed and asleep in a timely manner. As she was about to walk out the door, she said, "Oh, by the way, I promised Tommy that if he would stay in bed, you would buy him a pony in the morning."

We laugh, but let's look at this. There is a fine line between a promise and a bribe. God does not step across that line. God does not bribe us to be Christians. God does not tell us that if we surrender our lives that our ways will be smooth. God invites us to be Christian followers but we have to choose to do so. If God bribed us into being believers, we would not be walking by faith. We would simply be looking out for our best interest. In short, we would be selfish believers.

Yes, God allows us to be tried, tested, and sometimes downright terrified. Craig Brian Larson in his book entitled, *Hang in There. . . to the Better End* reminds us that God's chosen people often had to endure long waits that tested their patience before they saw the fulfilment of God's promises. For example:

- Another man by the name of ". . . Joseph, while just a teenager, had a dream in which he was a mighty ruler. Soon afterwards, Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. Then, Joseph spent years in prison under false charges. Only after all this heartache did Joseph see his dream come true, when he rose to power as the Egyptian pharaoh's right-hand man."

-“God’s promises are glorious,” says Craig Larson, “but they come to pass in God’s time, not ours.”

That happened to Mary and Joseph. They had to wait to see the promises of God fulfilled, but they were fulfilled. Mary did give birth to the Messiah. He did save the nations from their sins just as God had promised. All the world was blessed because Mary and Joseph were faithful in their service to God. We are called to do the same!

Now, I can’t stand here today and tell you that the year 2010 will be your best year ever. But I can tell you this: The same God who provided for Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus on the way to Egypt and while there, is the same God who watches over you and me. My friends, -We are never alone, and the promises of God are sure!

And God’s people said, “Amen!”