

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey St. Matthias Episcopal Church, Minocqua, Wisconsin

My dad has a favorite type or genre of movies I call the saga of the long-suffering father. It's usually a comedy that begins when a father's perceived well ordered family life is disrupted, usually – but not always - by his children. The comedic moments progress as the father tries unsuccessfully to restore order and control. Peace only comes once he accepts the change the disruption brings and adapts to it. Examples include movies like *Father of the Bride*, or my dad's most recent favorite, the 1947 movie starring William Powell and Irene Dunn called *Life with Father* about the ensuing family comedy that results after it comes to light father was not baptized and his good wife does absolutely everything possible to remedy that situation. Once my dad saw it, he enjoyed the movie so much he made it his mission to watch it with me. So, we gave him a copy for Christmas so he can watch it anytime he wants.

At first glance, today's Gospel has a lot in common with the long-suffering father trope. Our gospel lesson on this second Sunday in the season of Christmas comes from Matthew's Gospel, which tells a different birth narrative than Luke's version, which is the one we hear every Christmas Eve. Of the four gospels, you might remember only two tell the story of Jesus' birth, Luke and Matthew. While Luke focuses on Mary's side of it, recounting visits from the angel Gabriel, support from her elder cousin Elizabeth, and gives Mary powerful dialogue expressing her faith and fidelity to God, as well as a song that is still sung to this day in churches the world over, Matthew's version gives us Joseph's vantage point. However, Joseph is not given one word of dialogue, he doesn't get a cool song to sing, nor supportive family to help him. Instead, Joseph was given dreams. Dreams that tell him what to do.

We did not read how Joseph felt or thought about those dreams, only that he obediently got up and did what he was told, perhaps at great cost to himself. We read Joseph moved his family not once but twice, probably within a timespan of just a few years, without any guarantee of a good paying job waiting for him, or a house. He did not have a contract or letter of agreement with a company before he moved. He had to pay his own moving expenses. He probably left what he knew to go into the unknown, with his wife and an infant, without any guarantee he could provide for them, all because of dreams.

Joseph often gets lifted up as a good provider, despite being in the middle of so much constant disruption. Like those long-suffering fathers in the movies, he keeps his mouth shut, does what he is told, and quietly figures out how to keep his family fed, clothed, and housed. And I'm not about to suggest he is anything different, but I do want to invite us to go a little deeper into today's Gospel and consider those disruptions and their connection to Christmas.

Today the church is still celebrating Christmas; even though the radio channels stopped playing Christmas music well over a week ago and some folks have taken down their Christmas trees and turned off their Christmas lights. But, as I said throughout the season of Advent, the Church has its own calendar, its own way of telling time and moving through a year, one that is counter to or different from what everyone else is doing. For the church, Christmas is not a season of consuming, nor is it a season that leads up to or counts down to an event. Christmas is a twelve-day celebration of the incarnation – that's a church word for the mystery of Jesus' birth and what it means. For the church Christmas isn't about biological birth; it is the theological implications of God being born in the middle of human history and life. That's a big mystery, one we aren't meant to solve or figure out, because incarnation is not a problem to be fixed, it is something to wonder, to come close to, and allow it to come close to us.

Because such a mystery can't be explained, each Gospel takes a different approach to it. Mark's gospel mostly avoids it, John has some powerful poetic imagery, Luke has angels, shepherds, and a demanding government, and Matthew has dreams, a star, magi (whose arrival the church celebrates tomorrow on the feast of the Epiphany), presents, and an evil dictator who mercilessly murdered all the male babies aged two and under in Bethlehem. All the gospels tell us it isn't enough that Jesus was born.

Jesus' entrance into the world was a huge disruption that not only disturbed the lives of Mary and Joseph, but apparently one of the most powerful leaders of that time and place: Herod the Great.

The historians among us probably already know that although Herod contributed a great deal to the building of the Jewish temple, it was not without moral costs like branding it with a symbol of the Roman empire. And the older he got the more paranoid he got. Herod murdered anyone he decided was a threat to his power and status, including his own wife and children. When Herod learned of Jesus' birth from the magi, he was so frightened of a baby, he ordered the deaths of all boys aged two and under just to be sure the threat was taken care of.

Historians try to comfort us modern readers who understandably are upset by this violence in the Gospel by saying there is no evidence of this event, called the murder of the innocents, and that it was possibly invented by the author of Matthew to tie Jesus to Moses, whose story begins with a similar infanticide. In fact, some theologians and scholars tell us it is highly unlikely any of the events we read in today's Gospel happened. For example, there were no dreams. Sorry Joseph. They were invented to connect Jesus to a Joseph of the Old Testament, the one with the technicolor dream coat, according to Andrew Lloyd Weber's version of the story. The Joseph who, after being sold as a slave into Egypt, rose to power through his gift of dream interpretation and eventually rescued his family and people from starvation by bringing them into Egypt where they would eventually become slaves and were led out of Egypt by the great Moses. Scholars tell us it was important for the author of Matthew's Gospel to connect Jesus to this story because for Matthew, the Messiah is the new Moses, leading people into liberation from the oppression of the slavery of sin. It is also possible the author of Matthew's Gospel was trying to convey Jesus is the only one who obeyed God and therefore fulfilled God's promise to God's people. So, all this is about who Jesus is, not what happened.

And it is possible all that is true. It is also possible that Matthew's Gospel is telling us something else about Christmas – it is not about comfort, convenience, or control. Jesus' birth, God becoming flesh and dwelling among us disrupts things like the status quo and exposes the systems of power we so readily accept and follow are not the way God intended us to live. We might even be able to think of modern-day versions of Herod, those whose hunger for power is never satisfied. We might also be aware of modern-day families who left their homeland because of the threat of violence or death in search of a safe place to live, even without the guarantee of a secure job that will provide for a family.

Despite its threats of violence and disruption, today's Christmas Gospel reminds us God is well aware of all that is wrong with the world. God is aware of the abuses of power and the pain and suffering those abuses cause. Matthew's Gospel also reveals through the Incarnation, through Jesus' birth, God stands not with the rich and powerful and financially secure, but with the poor, the refugee, and the person who follows God, even without guarantee of their own personal comfort or financial security. Through the incarnation, God is not going to magically make those abuses disappear, but God has not abandoned us. God loves us so much God wants to be with us in the worst times, because that is how God reconciles all that is, everything that is, even you and me, to God's self. Although God doesn't wipe out evil, the gift of the incarnation reminds us we can choose how we will respond to it.

And while it is tempting to focus on the Herods of the world and the grief they cause in places as far away as foreign dictators or government offices, to places closer to home like boardrooms, meetings, office or church politics, today's Christmas Gospel invites us to do the incarnational work of focusing on opportunities for Christ to be embodied in how we engage with the world by asking the difficult question: are we people who strive to hold onto power at any cost, or do we, like the long suffering Joseph, practice forgiveness and embody the goodwill of reconciliation?

Not all disruptions are comedic, but they can remind us, as Joseph showed us, Jesus himself brought them and faced them, suffered them, and somehow through disruptions came closer to us, which

means there is a chance a disruption can bring us closer to Jesus. While not necessarily a merry or jolly image, it is still Christmas, which can be comforting in its own way.