

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

This week I visited Minneapolis for the fifth time in the last year and a half. Thank heavens for all the signs that help me get my bearings and direct me where to go—the street signs, instructional signs, caution signs. At the airport yesterday I was especially thankful to find the sign that said TSA Pre-Check and also to see that my boarding pass confirmed I could go there instead of standing in line for an hour or more. Signs are helpful, convenient, and save us a significant amount of time. They make our journeys more certain and safe, and if we follow them we can generally be sure we'll end up at the right place and in one piece. But we take them for granted unless they are not there and we're left to find our own way!

Unfortunately, there were no signs posted to give Joseph directions about what he should do after the wise men left. It's likely he had planned to just go back home, and that wouldn't have been a problem. He knew the way. He did not know the dangers that lurked ahead for the Baby Jesus in the person and power of Herod the Great. Herod had been appointed "king of the Jews" by the Roman government, a title that's familiar to us because it's the same title used to describe Jesus in his passion.

Surely Joseph was alarmed by his dream, by the angel who told him he must go to Egypt for safety's sake, to keep away from Herod. Remember, the wise men had also been warned about Herod in a dream. These dreams, for the wise men and also for the holy family, were just about as close to danger signs as they would find. For Herod, the baby represented danger because of the ancient prophecies, signs to him that the power he held most dear was being threatened. For Joseph, keeping this precious baby from harm was his first priority. The holy child and his earthly parents became refugees, fleeing from political tyranny. It would be difficult to ignore the parallels between them and hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing for their children's lives since them, including those in our own time.

Then there are the verses missing from today's Gospel, verses 16-18, that tell briefly about the death of the Holy Innocents. They were babies, innocent children under the age of two, who were sought out and killed in Herod's efforts to get rid of the one child who had been *born* "king of the Jews," not appointed to the title as Herod had been. The missing verses remind us what a threat this child was to Herod, of the actions Herod was willing to take to eliminate the threat, and how important Joseph's dreams were to the life and legacy of the holy baby, dreams that eventually led Joseph to Galilee, to the city of Nazareth that we know as Jesus' childhood home.

The child who was born to be our savior could have grown up anywhere and still he would have been holy, so his landing in Nazareth is not necessarily what we need to remember from this story. Instead, we should remember that Joseph paid attention to the signs that were before him and he obeyed them. Was he tempted to just go on home, perhaps thinking that these were only dreams and maybe they didn't mean anything? Perhaps. But what Joseph was thinking doesn't really matter in the outcome of the story. Without his attention and obedience to God's direction, things might have been different. Joseph's response to the dreams helped set the stage for what would happen later.

It's pretty easy to look at a story like this one and see how God is working in it, easier perhaps than to see how God is working in us and through us, and how God calls us to respond to the situations of our lives and in our world. We cannot be objective about ourselves because we're too involved. Often, we overlook the signs and signals, both those that warn us of danger and those that offer us guidance and encouragement. When we *are* aware of signals from God, we might wonder whether

we're really acknowledging God's work in our lives or whether we're attributing to God what *we* really want for ourselves, or what *we* think is really best. Fortunately, through prayer and study and worship, we can teach ourselves to be aware, so that when God sends angels to us in dreams or through others, we recognize them and respond in faith.

The season of Christmas is full of signs of God's presence and work in our lives. Often we experience it by sensing God in our feelings rather than in our tangible reality, in truth rather than in fact. Joseph would have had a hard time proving that God came to him through the angel of a dream, but he knew it to be true. If he believed it to be otherwise, he would have just gone back home, endangering the life of the newborn King.

After our 10:30 service today, the greens that have beautified our church for the Christmas season will be taken down and stored for next year and the poinsettias sent home with those who donated them. I imagine many of us have already undecorated our homes. That doesn't mean we have to lose the sense of the season, the spirit of it. Someone once said that nothing packs up and gets out of town faster than the Christmas spirit—except the circus. We're ready to get back to normal, but normal isn't what God calls us to be. On Wednesday we'll remember the first Epiphany, that time when the wise men from the East came to see the Christ child and pay homage to him. An epiphany is a moment in which you suddenly see or understand something in a new or very clear way. I wonder what God is bringing to us to see in a new or very clear way in this New Year. What will *we* do after the wise men leave? How will *we* live differently?

Using words from the letter to the church at Ephesus, I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know him, so that, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we may know what is the hope to which he has called us, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe."

Amen.