

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“A New Normal”

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### **Matthew 2:13-22**

*13 Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’<sup>14</sup> Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt,<sup>15</sup> and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.’*

*16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.<sup>17</sup> Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:*

*<sup>18</sup> ‘A voice was heard in Ramah,  
wailing and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.’*

*19 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said,<sup>20</sup> ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.’<sup>21</sup> Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.<sup>22</sup> But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee.*

I heard a local newscaster the other night remark, “Now that the Christmas season is over, things are getting back to normal.” The remark caught me a bit by surprise first because the Christmas season is not over. Actually Christmas just begins on December 25 and continues for twelve days. You know there is really some meaning behind those drummers drumming and ladies dancing! According to the lectionary, this is the second Sunday of Christmas. But the woman had a point. There really isn’t much Christmas feeling to this Sunday, is there? Even though liturgically it is still Christmas, it feels like the season is over.

Secondly, the newscaster said that things were back to normal. She said it in a way that lifted up a return to normal as good thing to achieve. I certainly hope not. Christmas is about moving us away from normal, past our routines into a realm of new possibilities. Again, perhaps the woman was right. We really don’t fully embrace the

promises of Christmas. We long too much for the comfort of the customary and are just fine with how things are.

I drove through my neighborhood the other day and noticed some rather ordinary yet profound things. Where just a couple of weeks ago the streets were lined with beautiful, twinkling lights, now some of those lights are turned off. There were trash cans overflowing with the waste of Christmas celebrations. Beside some trash cans were a couple of former Christmas trees, once decorated beautifully as the centerpiece of Christmas celebration. Now they are ready for the landfill or at best, to be recycled for the spring mulch.

Maybe if you have already packed up the seasonal decorations in the large Rubbermaid boxes or in Styrofoam and carried them back into the basement or the attic. Perhaps this is a good time to remind you that we will be taking down our Christmas decorations here at Meadowbrook next Saturday at 10 a.m. We could use the help, you know! Whatever your progress in de-decorating, you may be ready to move on because it feels like the Christmas season should be over. The kids go back to school tomorrow. We are ready to get back to normal ourselves.

In the poem, *The Time Being*, W. H. Auden writes about the period of time that follows the celebration of Christmas:

“Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree, putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes-  
Some have gotten broken-  
And carrying them up to the attic.  
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt. And the children gotten ready for school. There are enough leftovers to do, warmed up- for the rest of the week.  
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,  
Stayed up so late, attempted (quite unsuccessfully)  
To love all of our relatives, and in general  
Grossly overestimated our powers,  
Once again  
As in previous years we have seen the actual vision and failed to do more than entertain it as an agreeable possibility, once again we have sent Him away begging though to remain His disobedient servant,  
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.  
The Christmas feast is already a fading memory...”

Auden’s words seem to indicate that despite our grandest hopes, Christmas doesn’t really change much about us or our world. It is at best, a brief pause. Auden goes on to say that these days after the celebration of Christmas are “the most trying times of all” because we realize that if we took Christmas seriously, we would be changed. We would be viewing life from the plateau of a new normal.

I wonder if Mary and Joseph were as ready to return to normal as we are. By now we know the story well. There were those appearances by angels that informed them of the rather embarrassing situation. There were the awkward social explanations. Then there was that whole census thing that took them away from home

and put them in a stable with animals. Traveling is usually not fun, especially when it involves a donkey, pregnancy, and rough roads. There was the birth, never a routine thing under the most convenient and sterile circumstances. And then Mary and Joseph had to host some visitors, kind of the first holiday party in a way, with shepherds and wise men, strangers showing up to offer gifts to the newborn babe. I would guess that after all of this Joseph was looking forward to returning to the carpenter's bench in Nazareth and Mary couldn't wait until she was washing the swaddling clothes in her own more comfortable home. The holy family had probably seen enough of what we now know as Christmas. They were ready for life to return to normal. But it wasn't to be. The birth of this baby Jesus meant that they were never to see normal again. Jesus had brought with him a new normal.

A few weeks ago, during the Thanksgiving season, when there was a great deal of controversy about airport security and full body scans and searches, I heard a television reporter remark that "this is the new normal." Since the underwear bomber scare of last Christmas, what we knew of as routine would not be accepted anymore. Things would now be different. There will be change. It may not be comfortable. It may bring more uncertainty. But it is a reality we must accept and to which we must all adjust.

This is the first lesson of a new normal. Things in life can change quickly. And that change can bring uncertainty and even grief. According to our Scripture lesson this morning things change rather fast for the Holy Family. One moment a star is shining over the manger and angels are singing of God's glory in the highest. The next moment is filled with darkness and blood and fear. James Lamkin writes that there is no more sleeping in heavenly peace. In just a few verses the flutter of angels' wings in Joseph's dream are replaced by the footsteps of soldiers going door to door looking for babies to kill. And the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes! Matthew quotes Jeremiah who speaks of Rachel, weeping and wailing for her children who are no more.

It is difficult to understand why such a bloody story must follow such a beautiful and promising tale. Yet maybe it is there just for us to know what life with the gift of Christmas is all about. The presence of God's love on earth will not eliminate the threat of the evil tyrant or even our vulnerability to the uncertainties of life. It may have felt that way for only a moment on Christmas Eve but now we know differently in the new normal. Yet God acts in this story to save, and God provides a place for safety and protection. We also know that in even in our insecurities, God's power to save is greater than any threat to destroy.

In a sermon, Lamkin points out another thing. In a new normal, in tough times with uncomfortable choices and difficult decisions, we can know that God has been there before. We need not fear the unknown. Even in our times of loss, even in our hiding in Egypt, even in our uncertainty about our future, it is not new to God. Lamkin notes that the Holy Family faced a new reality of life yet they found themselves walking the same path as their historical ancestors. They went down to Egypt as the people of Israel had. They then settled in Nazareth to fulfill what the prophets had said. The story of Mary and Joseph and Jesus had unexpected twists and turns but it was all on God's map. It may have been a story a long time in the making but it was part of the pages that had already been written.

I suppose we can compare our times of living with more questions than answers to our need for a GPS when driving in an unfamiliar area. We may not know where we are but we are confident that our place of destination is mapped out somewhere in the words and pictures of that little box. Someone has been there before us to find the way. If we follow faithfully, we can be sure of our arrival, even though we might not be able to predict the route we have to take.

And so we recognize the second and final Sunday in the season that is Christmas. Today we live in a new normal. Something has changed. Things are a bit more unsettled. We have put away the sentimental celebration of the season and now we must embrace the new normal it represents in our life of faith. We have left behind the familiar and bittersweet days of an old year and celebrated the promise of a new but uncertain set of days. Even in this new normal we know that there are many more “new normals” yet to arrive. But we also know this: our lives, our story include God’s power to save. If we seek God in our lives, then we will find meaning in each new day and each path. And our lives and our story are part of God’s larger story. There is nothing that is new to God. Knowing that God has been with us in the past, we know that God will meet us in whatever future we face.