

Christmas 1A 28/12/ 2025

As we approach the start of this new year, it invites us to take out the map of our life and look at it carefully. This is a time to recognise where we have been, so that we may be better prepared for the future that awaits us.

Where have you traveled in your life during these past 12 months? What is there to celebrate? What is there to lament? Who have been your companions on this journey? What have been the regrets, the surprises, the delights, the moments of judgment, the seasons of grace?

The end of one old year and the start of a new one invites us to look at our maps, review our travels and reorient ourselves for whatever road lies ahead.

The gospel for this First Sunday After Christmas Day presents us with a map to look at. It is a map of where the Holy Family traveled in the months, perhaps years, after the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem.

This is a zigzag map. The silent night, holy night when all is calm, all is bright, does not last long for Joseph, Mary and the baby. It seems that when Christ's birth is made known, King Herod trembles for his throne. The news of another monarch born in his territory raises in his mind fears of insurrection, the end of his time as ruler, maybe the end of his life.

Meanwhile, Joseph wakes up in the dark of night out of a troubled sleep. In his dream, an angel demanded that he take up the child and his mother and leave town, because Herod's soldiers, the servants of his paranoia, were already about the cruel business of slaughtering every baby boy in that vicinity in order to eliminate the newborn Messiah. Even as husband and wife stumble about, making the briefest of preparations, the devouring sword draws near.

The angel does not send them back to their hometown of Nazareth. Instead, he sends them on a journey lasting hundreds of miles, which takes them in the opposite direction.

They are to go to Egypt, a strange and alien land. This route saves their child's life, yet it is a zigzag, not what they expected when they lay down to sleep the night before.

In Egypt there are large Jewish colonies, and probably it is in one of these that Joseph and his family find a place to live. The baby prospers in that strange land, and days and months go by quickly for the young family.

Finally Joseph, the man of dreams, is awakened again from his sleep. Again an angel has appeared to him with momentous news. Herod, that killer of children, is now dead. It is safe to return, safe to go back to the land of Israel, that place they left in haste and fear. Joseph, Mary and their toddler son pack up and leave, invigorated by a sense of relief and hope.

Perhaps they had expected to remain permanently in Egypt, but there is another zigzag. Back home they go.

Once they arrive in the land of Israel, they hear that Herod indeed is dead, but his son has succeeded him, Archelaus, who is no better than his father. So Joseph and Mary decide to keep away from

Judah, the region where Archelaus holds sway. In response to yet another dream, they continue northward to Galilee, to their own town, Nazareth. There they find safety and familiar faces welcome them. This is yet another zigzag.

A long and unpredictable journey, a zigzag trip, has taken them back home again so long after that census in Bethlehem. It's a strange sight to see on the map, the life of this young family and their travels over many months.

Matthew's gospel recounts events around the early life of Jesus as the fulfilment of prophecies from the Old Testament. Thus, the opening chapters of Matthew are studded with Old Testament quotations as I mentioned last Sunday.

This happens, in particular, with the zigzag trip taken by the Holy Family. Two quotations are cited to shed light on this journey. The first, from Hosea, is applied to the flight into Egypt and the return to Israel. "Out of Egypt I have called my Son" are the words attributed to God.

The other quotation, of uncertain origin as I mentioned last week and is applied to Jesus when he's finally a resident in Nazareth. A single word describes him: "He will be called a Nazarene."

The significance of this second quotation is unclear. It may represent a play on words referring to Jesus as the long-expected branch growing up from the stump of Jesse, father of King David.

But the significance of the first quotation is clear. "Out of Egypt I have called my son." The reference here is to Egypt as that place where Israel was enslaved centuries before the birth of Jesus. God heard the cry of his oppressed people and acted decisively to win their freedom. Moses became the Lord's agent in the struggle that culminated at the Red Sea. There the people of Israel passed through on dry ground while the Egyptian army that was pursuing them was swept away by the returning waters.

The Exodus was the Lord rescuing his beloved child, calling his son out of Egypt. This was the event that made Israel a people, the people of the Lord.

That God also calls his son Jesus out of exile, out of Egypt, back to his home, means that Jesus is a new and better Moses, about to lead a new and better Exodus, one that will deliver all people out of the realm of sin and death.

So in the story of the Holy Family, the zigs and the zags have their purpose. The path taken by this little household – driven as they are by angels, led by a man who listens to his dreams – is no purposeless wandering. It serves the intention of God's mercy: to offer new and lasting freedom to all the people of the earth.

Now is a season for each one of us to look at our own map; not simply the past 12 months, but all the years we have lived, and those still to come.

If we consider that map with care and honesty, we will recognise zigs and zags along the way, times that seemed to make no sense, moments when the road simply disappeared or led to places that should be avoided.

Look at the map, and there may be those nights, those days, when what drove you was a dream with a good angel, one seeking your safety, your redemption and new life not for you alone.

There may be for you no straight, consistent, logical lines, no paths that make ordinary sense. There may be instead greater themes, themes that take more time to satisfy, that make sense only further down the road, themes that require you to listen to your life for what is both very old and yet still fresh.

You may find that some phrase sums it up, like a prophecy fulfilled. For once Israel was led forth from Egypt. Then Jesus, still a child, came forth from Egypt. God remains in the Exodus business, and it may be that your story, your map, reveals that once again God has brought forth his child out of some slavery into the bright hope of freedom.

God writes straight with crooked lines. Let's amend that saying just a bit: God uses zigs and zags to prepare an open road for his people.

Like the Holy Family, you may find this true if you look intently at the route you've traveled. Like Jesus, you may discover that time you spent away, literally or metaphorically, was for the sake of calling you home and so that others could march home with you.

Now is the season for each of us to pay attention to what we've lived, the map we've traveled. The zigs and zags may point to angels who speak in good dreams, who in turn point to One who still calls each of us "Child" and welcomes us back home.

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