

JOSEPH AND THREE DREAMS
Matthew 2:13-23

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on December 29, 2019, the First Sunday after Christmas, at
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

Now after [the magi] 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.'

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

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. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

*'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.'*

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, '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.'

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 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. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'

I.

Over the past several months, I have focused my outside reading on the four books that constitute *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, by Robert Caro. Caro is now in his eighties, and still promises to complete the fifth volume in the series on LBJ's time as President.

One of the stunning portraits Caro paints is that of Coke Robert Stevenson, who served as Governor of Texas from 1941-1949 and whom Johnson barely defeated in a race for the United States Senate, in an election whose results are highly questionable.

Caro's opening portrayal of Coke Stevenson is phenomenal, both in what he says and the way he says it:

In all the vast and empty Hill Country, there was no more deserted area than the seventy miles of rolling hills and towering limestone cliffs between Brady and Junction...Only a few widely scattered ranch houses dotted that area; for long stretches, after night fell, not a single light marked a human presence.

Beginning in the year 1904, however, there was one light. It was the light of a campfire. Each night it was in a different location, for it marked the camp of a wagon traveling each week back and forth between Brady and Junction.

Lying in the little circle of flickering light cast by the fire was a single person: a slender teenage boy. He would be lying beside the fire on his stomach, reading a book.

The boy was the son of impoverished parents. He was determined to be something more, and his determination had led him to haul freight between Junction and Brady. Older men, deterred by the loneliness of five nights alone each week in the trackless hills and by the seven dangerous, often impassable, streams that would have to be forded on each trip, had refused even to try to do that. But the boy had tried, and had succeeded. The little freight line was beginning to pay. Yet he was determined to be something more. He wanted a profession, and had written away to a correspondence school for textbooks on bookkeeping. And at night, he would be studying them, in the little circle of light from his campfire.

The boy was Coke Robert Stevenson.

Caro concludes: "Stevenson's whole life was the raw material out of which [the legend of the West] is made."¹

I lived in Texas long enough and west enough to have acquired some idea of what this scene involves: the dark, quiet, lonely, yet dangerous place the Hill country is, and the sheer courage and ambition it took to haul freight across the land by day and study bookkeeping by fire at night. Caro's portrait depicts raw human heroism of a young boy in the early stages of seeking his dreams.

II.

Whenever I encounter Joseph in the Gospel of Matthew, I cannot help but be drawn to the tremendous human effort he displayed in the first few years of the life of his adopted son, Jesus Christ.

Listen to the sparse way Matthew describes all Joseph did:

...after [the magi] had left, [barely a few hours after the birth of Jesus] 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.'

¹ Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2019), 145-146. Originally published in 1990.

Joseph knew who Herod was:

- the Roman ruler who in light of the request of the magi concerning where they might find the one born “King of the Jews” immediately ordered the death of all children two years old and under so as to be certain to eliminate Joseph’s son as a potential threat to his kingdom and possessor of his crown;
- the Roman ruler who had killed three of his own sons because he saw them as threats to his power.²

Joseph knew any person who could do that would not wince at the death of Joseph’s own son. Thus, Joseph’s obedience to the angel’s instructions was immediate:

...Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt...

Can you imagine the sheer physical hardship involved in carrying out this decision? Traveling by night. In the desert. With a young mother who hours before has given birth and with an infant exposed to the elements. “Trackless hills.” “Not a single light marking a human presence.” If only he had had one of the camels on which the wise men had brought him gifts...

Matthew then tells us – again with almost no detail – that Joseph and his family

remained there [in the foreign land of Egypt] until the death of Herod.

Most people who study the history of that period maintain that Christ was likely born in what we now label 6 BC (or BCE) and that Herod died two years later in 4 BCE.³ If they are correct, Joseph and Mary and their infant Jesus lived for two or more years in Egypt. Matthew does not depict the conditions in which they lived, but it was likely one which made infant mortality so high in those days and places: perhaps a refugee camp, perhaps on the streets, perhaps isolated in the desert, perhaps at the home of someone they knew from their prior life or had come to know in their lives as refugees. Their quarters were likely less than the silken palaces of Pharaoh’s court Joseph’s ancestor and namesake from the Book of Genesis lived as a resident alien in Egypt over 1700 years before.⁴

Then one day word came – suddenly – that Herod had died. “When Herod died,” says Matthew. “When Herod died.”

On May 2, 2011, the night President Obama announced the death of Osama bin Laden, I was at Reagan Airport picking up my wife Maggie from a trip. I watched the announcement on monitors in the airport; she told me the pilot had made the announcement when they were in mid-air.

We retrieved her luggage and made a snap decision to drive into DC to at least view the monuments from our car on this important night. There were hundreds of people beginning to gather – mostly young, mostly students – in a contained but joyous celebration. We called each of our children on the phone, and as we were driving back home, we remarked that this was the first time that we fully appreciated how much the attacks of 9/11 had shaped the lives of our children.

²Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1977), 226.

³ Brown 166-167.

⁴ Genesis 38-50.

It felt odd to celebrate the death of another human being, even one as evil as Osama bin Laden; but just as the words “When Herod Died” came as good news to Joseph, the announcement we had heard from the President came as good news to us.

In light of the new to Joseph,

...an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said,

‘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.’

As he had done before, Joseph again obeyed the words of the angel:

...Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

In the two years since Joseph and his family had travelled to Egypt, not much had changed. The land was the same. The weather was the same. The technology of travel had not improved. Their child was older and squirmier, requiring more attention and monitoring, but nothing else really had changed.

Along the way, Joseph had heard

...Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, [and Joseph] was [suddenly] afraid to go there.

Joseph’s fear was an appropriate response to the political situation in the land to which he was returning. Archelaus and his two brothers had split the kingdom their father left them, but Archelaus was “the least liked of the three because of his dictatorial ways.” His brutality was intolerable, and he would be overthrown after just two years on the throne, but when Joseph was free to leave Egypt, Archelaus was still in power.⁵

For a third time in this scene, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream, leading Joseph to change his route and turn and go to Galilee, in the north, where he made his home in Nazareth. It is from Nazareth that, three decades later, Joseph’s son will set out and begin his ministry with baptism, temptation, Sermon on the Mount.

Once Joseph gets Mary and Jesus to Nazareth, he is never again referred to in the Gospel of Matthew.

- He may have slipped into a quiet and welcome obscurity.
- He may have passed away.
- He may simply not have been inclined to follow his son into the dangerous places his son would go.

We do not know what happened to Joseph, but we can tell that he played a heroic and dangerous role in following the voice of an angel to become the father of the Messiah, to leave Israel for Egypt, and then to return to Galilee. He may have been obscure, but what Joseph did matters.

⁵ Brown 206-207.

III.

What points can we draw from this depiction of Joseph?

First, even though Jesus was the Messiah, Son of God, in Matthew's telling at least two ordinary people were instrumental in Christ's work of redeeming the world. One was Mary. One was Joseph. To be sure God would have accomplished that redemption without them and would likely have chosen someone else to play the roles they played, but Mary and Joseph accepted the roles and played the parts. Once Joseph's role was complete, he quietly exits: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Second, though the voice of God was clear to Joseph, coming to him through the voice of an angel appearing to him through dreams, it still takes Joseph courage to follow the voice. Joseph chose the power of the dream rather than dreams of power. Joseph chose action over passivity, movement over stasis, setting out for a new land over remaining in the security of home. Joseph defied natural human gravity in favor of the riskier choice of following a dream and listening to the voice of an angel. Whenever the angel said, "Get up and go," Joseph "got up and went."

Third, in the long and complex history of the relationship between church and state, faith and politics, obedience to God and obedience to earthly powers, Joseph faces the decision to obey the civil authority or obey God.

- In Luke's Gospel, Joseph *obeys* the order of the governor to travel to Bethlehem and submit himself and his family to a census.⁶
- In Matthew, Joseph chooses the opposite: to *flee* from the tyrannical power of Herod and *resist* the ruler's demands for death.

Thus, in one Gospel, Joseph works *with* governing authorities; in another, he works *against* them.

It is a choice that transcends Joseph's time: in every culture, in every decision, in nearly every moment, Christians and churches have to decide whether they

- support the particular actions of the state (while still honoring civil authority as ordained by God⁷)
- as oppose state action through some appropriate means.

The questions are perennial for people and institutions of faith. Joseph's facing them and answering them in a particular way keep the questions before us in our day and time.

And *fourth*, Joseph's plight reveals the tremendous human courage many people display in leaving their own land for another land and in risking their lives, their children's lives, their future. Even the tenacity of a Coke Stevenson does not exceed that of a refugee, seeking freedom, seeking asylum, seeking escape from genocide and poverty and drugs and crime and disease and hunger and hopelessness. Joseph crossed the borders into Egypt to spare his son; he returned home to Israel for the sake of his son; he re-located within

⁶ Luke 2:1-5.

⁷ Romans 13:1-7.

Israel for the sake of his son; these actions taken together constitute a contribution this first-time father made to human history.

IV.

The late Presbyterian poet Ann Weems once wrote:

Who put Joseph in the back of the stable?
Who dressed him in brown, put a staff in his hand,
and told him to stand in the back of the crèche,
background for the magnificent light of the Madonna?

God-chosen, this man Joseph was faithful
in spite of the gossip in Nazareth,
in spite of the danger from Herod.
This man, Joseph, listened to angels
and it was he who named the Child
Emmanuel.
Is this a man to be stuck for centuries
in the *back* of the stable?
...

As a gesture of gratitude,
let's put Joseph in the *front* of the stable
where he can guard and greet
and cast an occasional glance
at this Child
who brought us life.⁸

I agree with Ann Weems. "Let's put Joseph in the front of the stable."

Amen.

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⁸ Ann Weems, "Getting to the Front of the Stable" in *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, page 52.