

Feast of the Holy Family, 2013

Have you ever noticed how quickly Matthew brings the Christmas story to an end? Luke at least gives us angels heralding our Lord's birth and shepherds coming to take a "look-see" at this new kid on the block, but Matthew announces Our Lord's birth and then tunes out.

Yes, we know that the Magi come some time later—after the holy family moved from a stable to a house—but we simply lose out with Matthew if we have any hope of hanging around the nursery for a few cutesy moments with Jesus.

But then suddenly Joseph is warned in a dream to take Jesus and Mary and "flee" to Egypt, escaping King Herod's murderous intentions. Our beloved holy family is on the run and noble, strong Joseph is God's agent of protection for Jesus and Mary. Joseph's willingness to deal with these challenges through faith and obedience gives us insight as to how we should live in faith and obedience as well.

Joseph listened to God's voice through the angel of the Lord and he obeyed. We have no record of Joseph questioning God's word as did Moses (and many others who were called by God). Even Mary questioned Gabriel when he appeared with the news of Jesus' impending birth to her: She said: How can this be, since I am a virgin? But Joseph simply listened and obeyed.

The accounts of Joseph's faith and obedience make it all look pretty easy. Joseph heard from God, he believed and he acted in obedience to God's instruction. We should do the same, right?

But instead we struggle to know when it's God talking to us rather than our own imagination. We struggle with the conflict between God's word to us and our own common sense. We struggle not only with issues of faith and obedience but also with the conflict between faith and doubt. Some would say it's the hardest thing about living as a follower of Christ.

Part of the struggle arises when we're sure we've heard God's voice and we act in obedience... and things do not turn out at all as we expected. Or when we pray in faith for someone who's sick and that person continues to get worse.

The struggle regarding faith and obedience comes when we see people who live by faith and nothing ever seems to improve for them. And on the flip side of that, there are the people who seemingly flaunt their ungodliness and unbelief and everything seems to go right for them.. These are not new concerns. As long as there have been people of faith, there have been questions as to why bad things happened to good people and why good things happen to bad people and how to remain faithful and obedient in the face of the apparent silence of God regarding their situation.

Returning to Matthew, there is no time for Mary and Joseph to put down roots in Bethlehem, much less dial into that community for care and support.

One gets the impression that this family with a babe in arms faces the terrors of life and has to run away to Egypt and there find safety. But soon—a few months? A year? We are not told—Joseph again is wrestled to the mat in a dream telling him to bring his family back home.

And so the holy family is, once again, on the run.

I wonder if we don't bond with this hasty, running, fleeing, exhausted holy family in stronger ways than we might imagine. Just what is it about the last 30 days or so that have wrung out so much energy from us, leaving us physically exhausted and perhaps financially drained?

So then, what might God be saying to us who finds our lives and the life of our family on the run? As Pastor Hybels once said about the big tasks God sets before us: "If you ever find yourself with a difficult assignment, why not try giving God thanks for trusting you with something that needs your particular strength. He assigns tasks to the right person every time. He did it throughout history and he still does it today. As you walk whatever potholed path he has asked you to walk, never forget the tough journey that Jesus himself once had to make. Christ was asked to bear the most difficult assignment of all: to lay down his life as a redemptive sacrifice for humankind and he chose to obey." Added to this notion, I recall a wonderful quote from the Marigold hotel movie: Everything will be okay at the end, if it is not yet okay, then it is not yet the end. The "end," the bottom line--that must be our focus here on earth.

Then along our journey, there's the fear factor. Whereas Joseph and Mary's fear for our Lord's safety was raised to the heavens, our fears may not be much lower.

Granted, few if any of us get through Christmas, fearing for our lives. But we just might get through the holidays afraid that so much of our lives was poured out in to holiday activity that we actually missed the meaning of the whole thing.

I mean, what happened to Christmas? Is it stashed away too soon, along with lights and boxes of ornaments?

My hunch is this fear factor works overtime during the Advent and Christmas seasons. We may fear we have not given the right gifts to the people we love or we fear that the house wasn't decorated in a way that doesn't set the right mood for the season.

I suspect some fear 2013 is about to end and for all our labor and sacrifice, the juggling of schedules and meetings of expectations, we have little if anything to show for it except a pile of credit card receipts here and a stack of regrets there.

The fear factor may keep us on the run more than we realize. But frustration may also have us on the run. Frustration shows up in the many areas of life during these last few days of the year.

If you have a business, you may be up to your eyeballs in numbers, making sure the year-end inventory is done and is accurate, asking yourself how you and your team will ever be able to balance off the pluses against the minuses.

And then those who have traveled to be with family know the frustration than can come with canceled or delayed flights or simply running out of precious time to be with ageing parents or rarely-seen siblings.

I suspect that Joseph and Mary knew a little bit about frustration.

They are engaged to be married only to find a holy child showing up not long after the engagement ceremony and then they have to quickly put together a household. Ask Joseph about having his carpentry business interrupted, his wages compromised, his client base ignored while he traipses all over the ancient world with a new mother and vulnerable son.

And yet with all the imagined and known frustrations the holy family endured, we see a level of faithfulness and devotion to God that humbles us all.

Here may be one the enduring gifts of the Christmas story never placed in a crèche or portrayed in a pageant. Simple people, defying overwhelming odds, in the face of horrific madness and possibly death, do what God tells them to do with no hint of regret.

How would we have handled these challenges? What would we have said to the angel who seemed to take some measure of delight in robbing you of a good night's sleep?

Whatever frustrations they felt, not a one of them kept them from doing God's work.

So let me hasten to add that this story gives us one last insight. No matter how palpable the frustration, Mary and Joseph rest in a faith that feels like a warm and comforting blanket.

When you find yourself on the run, faith is the traveling companion that will never abandon you to your fears or frustrations. Mary and Joseph show us a simple but profound faith in God's work in their lives that is nothing less than extraordinary.

This was a listening faith. Joseph not only heard the words of the angel Gabriel on three occasions, but he listened with the ears of his heart and deeply heard what God was saying to him.

First, he listened and heard that God was beginning a new day in the life of God's people through this One who would be called "Emmanuel."

Then he listened when the infant Christ was threatened with death & acted on what he heard to save his life. And finally, he listened when danger disappeared with Herod's death and brought his family home.

When you are on the run, a listening faith is vital for survival. And yes, the faith we see in the holy family was such a transforming faith.

If we will stop running for just a bit—maybe for the next few days at least—we might give God some space to do in our lives what only God can do

And what is that?

It is the work of grace that transforms us from being a carpenter or a peasant girl into God's agents for salvation.

The running can come to an end because we finally, wonderfully, gratefully discover that our Lord Jesus Christ is with us.

But let's be clear: for many of us, the faith struggle continues throughout life. There are times when we hear and obey and it seems as if nothing happens. But remember that Jesus walked this path before us. We serve the Christ who gave his life so we may live ours to the fullest and will one day see him face to face.

So with just a couple of days left in 2013 and perhaps no small measure of weariness hanging on from the holidays, know that God is with you now and listen for God's voice in whatever form it may come. Listen and obey by faith.