

Lost Footing, First Footing

When the magi had departed, an angel from the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him." Joseph got up and, during the night, took the child and his mother to Egypt. He stayed there until Herod died. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: I have called my son out of Egypt. When Herod knew the magi had fooled him, he grew very angry. He sent soldiers to kill all the children in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding territory who were two years old and younger, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. This fulfilled the word spoken through Jeremiah the prophet:

A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and much grieving.
Rachel weeping for her children,
and she did not want to be comforted,
because they were no more.

After King Herod died, an angel from the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt. "Get up," the angel said, "and take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel. Those who were trying to kill the child are dead." Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus ruled over Judea in place of his father Herod, Joseph was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he went to the area of Galilee. He settled in a city called Nazareth so that what was spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled: He will be called a Nazarene.

Mt. 2:13-23 (C.E.B.)

Sermon, Part 1.

A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and much grieving.
Rachel weeping for her children,
and she did not want to be comforted,
because they were no more.

Mt. 2:18 (C.E.B.)

As I tried – several times, in fact – I tried to write our Christmas letter this year, I found myself drawn to this part of the Christmas story. I found myself haunted by these words.

I knew this part of the story was there, and I knew there was pain involved. I had walked with lots of people through the difficult journey of grief that comes from burying a son or a daughter. I knew it was unlike any other pain. I knew we have words to describe the surviving spouse – a widow or widower – and we have words to describe the surviving children – orphans – but there are no equivalent words for a surviving parent.

But until this year, I did not fully comprehend the depth of the pain.

I knew there was pain. I also knew it is a much more common experience than we like to admit. In fact, a colleague who is a chaplain at a retirement community reported that nearly half of

the residents in the facility where he worked had buried children. It feels like we are alone, but we are not.

As I read the story of Herod's violence now, *after* Christmas, after my first Christmas as a bereaved parent, I find myself wondering about different details in the story. I have many questions, but I began by asking:

- How could this happen?
- How could anyone let a ruler intentionally put children to death?

It's as if the people have become detached from their beliefs, a framework of believing that begins with the conviction that all people are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). It's as if they have lost their footing and wandered down the wrong road.

And then I remember the story of Moses and how Pharaoh had done the same thing and how the people escaped and created a new nation. And I remember the persecution that caused people to flee England, landing at Plymouth Rock. And I remember the tragic stories of the slave traders in America who took people away from their homes in one place, causing many to die enroute to a world they did not choose. And I remember the horrors of the Holocaust. And more recently the deaths of children in Ukraine.

The leaders never acted alone. Others participated in the atrocities.

That's when I realize people have lost their footing on other occasions, too; many times, in fact. And that's when my wondering turns to self-examination. Am I the one who has lost his footing?

- Have I unintentionally participated in similar injustices?
- Have I acted in ways that treat one life as more important than another?
- Have I held the importance of my own safety and security and comfort to a level that it comes with the price of someone else's loss?
 - If so, how can I make penance?
- What is the way forward?

And how can the scriptures help me regain my footing?

I know the first step toward reconciliation is to own my sin, to recognize how and where I have participated in the societal bias that keeps me in a position of power and privilege, even when I haven't been conscious of it.

The next step is to listen to the stories of others and to speak the truth of my own story. It's part of the process used in the Truth and Reconciliation hearings held after national atrocities. It is one way to ensure we are maintaining healthy and loving relationships with God and with our neighbor.

When we live our lives in balance, we recognize the sacred worth God gives to each human life, including mine and yours, as well as the child who is seen as a threat to the King. Every child has sacred worth, whether they worship in a different space, or speak a different language, or stand on the other side of the border. No matter what color their skin or how long they have walked this earth, every person has sacred worth.

Even Herod has sacred worth.

He doesn't realize it, but in fact, Herod's choice to devalue the lives of infants devalues his own life. He has lost his footing and he doesn't know it.

When we spend time with God in worship and devotion, we learn the value God places on our lives, on all lives. We are precious in the eyes of God. Once we acknowledge our value, we bestow that value on the others who are also created in God's image. The defenseless child becomes precious in our eyes. And we respond with compassion and seek justice when the King Herod's of the world try to devalue them.

That occurred to a slave trader, once. He had grown up as an orphan who ended up as the captain of a ship. Like King Herod, he had devalued the lives of others only to realize it was his own life that was being devalued. It was a storm at sea that helped him realize how much his life relied upon grace, not his own capabilities, and that his value came from being created in the image of God.

He eventually left the slave trade and became a preacher. 250 years ago today, on January 1, 1773, in Olney, England, The Rev. John Newton gave a sermon about his transformation. Half a century later his words were paired with music and became one of the best-known hymns in the world, "Amazing Grace."¹

God's amazing grace is seen whenever we lose our footing and reach out to be rescued. God's grace appears when we recognize the sin in our own lives and the part we play in the sins of society. Our task, our response, requires both confession and repentance. It demands that we begin living in new ways from this point forward.

And what better way to do that than to begin the year with a nod to the past and our failures while we turn toward the future and commit to living in new ways.

First Footing Prayer²

With that in mind, I'm going to ask you to do something I know you've done before. I'm going to invite you to participate in the traditional "First Footing" prayer, except I'm changing the tradition slightly.

As in the past, I will ask you to stand as we pray. Then we will move through the North doors into the Fellowship Hall. We will stop there for more prayer before returning to the Sanctuary through the South doors.

This is a tradition and a ritual I had never encountered before, and in my research, I couldn't find much about it. I do know it is rooted in a Celtic tradition. That tradition includes a welcome for the first visitors who come to the door of your home with gifts for the new year, including coal, salt, bread, and whiskey. What we will do is blend that ritual with some Native American spirituality, skipping the gifts while acknowledging the directions of the four winds as a part of our prayer.³

¹ CBS Sunday Morning, December 25, 2022.

² The tradition of a "First Footing Prayer" was brought to Hope Mennonite Church by Dave Stevens, sometime around 2018. I spent time learning about the tradition, including watching a video of Dave's last "first footing prayer" before creating this version of the tradition.

³ The Prayers and reflections come from three primary sources:

a. Pastor Dave's 2021 prayer;

b. references from Leslie James, adapted from *Lakota Life* by Ron Zeilinger; and

So, I ask you now to stand and face West.

To the west, the sun sets, and the day ends. For this reason, Native Americans understand that west signifies the end of life. The great Thunderbird lives in the west and sends thunder and rain from its direction. For this reason, the west is also the source of water: rain, lakes, streams and rivers. Nothing can live without water, so the west is vital. So we face west.

Let us pray:

Eternal God, before whom we are creatures of the day and children of the hour, we lift our prayers to you as we stand in the shadows of the waning year.

Now we will pass through a doorway on the North.

North brings the cold, harsh winds of the winter season. These winds are cleansing. They cause the leaves to fall and the earth to rest under a blanket of snow. If someone has the ability to face these winds like the buffalo with its head into the storm, they have learned patience and endurance. Generally, this direction stands for hardships and discomfort. Therefore, north represents the trials people must endure and the cleansing they must undergo.

I will lead the congregation as we move through the doors.

We are aware once more of the fleetingness of time, and the transiency of our being. So much has happened to us during the year that is now past, so much of hurt and happiness, of loss and gain, of hope and fear. We did not expect the sorrow that was thrust upon us. We were surprised by the turn of events that changed our lives.

In the Fellowship Hall, I invite you to face East.

The direction from which the sun comes. Light dawns in the morning and spreads over the earth. This is the beginning of a new day. It is also the beginning of understanding because light helps us see things the way they really are. On a deeper level, east stands for the wisdom that help people live good lives. Traditional people rise in the morning to pray facing the dawn, asking God for wisdom and understanding. So we face east.

We look back. We remember how different life was a year ago. The slow, quiet erosion of the days has gone on, and we are not quite the same persons as we were, for better or for worse. We have had a whole year to grow in love or to fall out of love, to turn our hands to constructive tasks, or to turn away in idleness. We have had a whole year, and now it is gone.

Let us pray:

No matter what we have done or failed to do, O Lord, keep us from dwelling on it too much. If we have failed, help us put the failure behind us. If we have done well, help us be glad but not complacent. There are other hills to climb and new hopes to be realized.

Finally, we will pass through a doorway on the South.

c. Discipleship Resources, adapted from Kenneth G. Phifer, *A Book of Uncommon Prayer* (Upper Room Books, 1981), p 121.

Because the southern sky is when the sun is at its highest, this direction stands for warmth and growing. The sun's rays are powerful in drawing life from the earth. It is said the life of all things comes from the south. Also, warm and pleasant winds come from the south. When people pass into the spirit world, they travel the Milky Way's path back to the south — returning from where they came.

I will lead the congregation as we move through the doors.

Let us pray:

We know, O God, you understand our need to look back for a while, wistfully peering at the past. But start us looking forward. We do not know what events are ahead, but we do know you are there, and we are grateful. Amen.

You may be seated.

Sermon, Part 2.

As I was sitting and reflecting on the plight and the flight of the holy family, I began to ask another set of questions:

- How many other parents fled the country?
- Where did they all end up?
- How many made the journey back home and how many made their home in a new place?

Then it occurred to me that the story of the “Escape to Egypt” is also reminiscent of other scriptural stories, including Hagar who was driven away from Abraham (Gen 21:5-21) and when Pharaoh asked the Hebrew midwives to kill the baby boys (Ex 1:15-16).

And what isn't as obvious in those stories is the way God responded to those seeking refuge. God was with them. God helped them find their first footing. God met the needs of Hagar (Gen. 21:17-19); God called forth Moses (2:3-10); God spoke to the exiles in Babylon (; God even provided clothing to Adam and Eve when they were driven from the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:21).

And then I thought about contemporary illustrations of fleeing refugees – from Afghanistan and Ukraine and Haiti and Guatemala. Or I think about the Uyghurs and the Ethiopians from the Tigray region. There are more refugees in the world today than ever before in human history.

In that context, I begin to understand the story of the flight into Egypt as a story of the incarnation. God is with us, especially perhaps, when we are fleeing places of unrest and violence. And the truth is most of us can name ancestors who found themselves in the same plight, fleeing one place or another for economic or political or religious reasons. The story of Jesus fleeing Herod is our story.

And while it is assuring to know God is with us, to know God has experienced what we have experienced, it is also a reminder that God provides safety along the way. When we lose our footing, God is there to help us find a new place to stand, to give us our first footing as we continue our journey into the unknown future.

Here at Hope, for example, God has been providing leadership for our church after the death of pastor Dave; and as we look toward the future, we know God will continue to provide for us. I don't know what our future will look like. But I do know we are in good hands.

After King Herod died, an angel from the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt. “Get up,” the angel said, “and take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel. Those who were trying to kill the child are dead.” Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

Mt 2:19-21 (C.E.B.)

Let us also “get up and go,” let’s go into the future God has in store for us.

Amen.

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