

Second Sunday after Christmas, Year B
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
January 3, 2021
Preached via Zoom during COVID-19

You may not know this, but we are celebrating something I think is pretty great today. We have been working together as parish and priest for five full years as of today. It was the second Sunday after Christmas when I met all of you. I always find that easy to remember because coincidentally it's also the anniversary of my ordination. I remember like it was yesterday greeting people at the door, not knowing who might be a newcomer and who had been at the parish for decades. And I remember the weight of the responsibility to lead you and to love you settle on my shoulders that morning.

When I looked out at the parish five years ago, I remember thinking that we had some problems that needed work. And I remember hoping that we could find some creative ways to address them. Even though I thought I was being pretty honest about some of the issues facing us, I can promise you that, in my wildest imaginings, I never one time thought that we would be sharing the kind of experience we had in 2020. I thought we needed new computers; I didn't think we needed to find a way to weather a global pandemic.

And here we are, still together. Still standing. Still following the path of Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Loving one another. Bearing one another's burdens. Studying the scriptures. Growing in faith and closeness to God. Bringing God's justice to the world. In other words, being the church. We are still doing it, and if anything, this time has made the gift of St. Mark's seem that much more precious. So, happy anniversary everyone — five years is a wonderful accomplishment. May our sixth be the very best yet!

I figure that you've heard me preach somewhere around 175 sermons. Some were pretty good. Some were pretty bad. Many were pretty average. If you don't know how the church chooses the readings for a particular Sunday, I can tell you that they are on a cycle designed to get the most important stories read at church over three years. Then the cycle repeats. What this means as a practical matter is that the preacher never gets to choose her or his text, and the preacher usually doesn't see what the text is until Monday or Tuesday. Sometimes the story is just ghastly and doesn't seem to have anything to do with life. And then other times, like this morning, the story is so germane to our shared life, you have to think that God is speaking to us with particular clarity.

This morning, Joseph has a dream. Two dreams, in fact. In the first, he is told to flee to Egypt with his family to save his newborn Son from the clutches of Herod, who intended to kill Jesus. In the second dream, Joseph receives the divine all clear and is able to return from Egypt to the region around Bethlehem, secure in the knowledge that Herod is dead, and Jesus is safe.

I was brought to mind of that fateful day in March when Kathy and I had to have a very hard conversation about whether we should suspend in-person worship. At the time, it was almost

inconceivable that a church like ours would close its doors on a Sunday morning. And, in fact, in the 125 years that St. Mark's has been serving the people of Milwaukee, I doubt it has ever closed its doors like it has this year. And yet, sometimes warnings come in a dream. We weren't worried about Herod; we were worried about COVID. And so we fled.

And that is where we find ourselves at the dawn of a new year — waiting in Egypt for God to come to us in a dream, telling us that it's time to return, that COVID has been defeated. And I can tell you with absolute confidence that we will receive that message in good time. I very much hope that this spring will bring with it some in person worship — likely small at first as we navigate the dual goods of safety and togetherness.

After all, God has been liberating people from Egypt for millenia. It's what God does. There is always some ruler, or disease, or enslavement that tries to harm the people of God. It's not usually as vivid as this pandemic, but we are no strangers to adversity. And so, for now, we bide our time, waiting to leave Egypt and return home, just as our ancestors have always done.

Even in our distress we have tried to remain faithful to God. And I do believe that when we return together, we will be stronger for all that we have learned during this exile. We are in a kind of exile right now, but it is an exile from danger, never an exile from God. In fact, God is nearer to us now than ever.

So, we wait for the dream. The dream from angels that tell us it is safe to return. And we use this time, not to be idle, but to continue being the people of God called to be a light to the world in need. Congratulations, St. Mark's. We have had an amazing five years. Here's to many more. Amen.