

A sermon for the Episcopal Church of the Epiphany in Winchester, Massachusetts. The sermon was preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on the Second Sunday of Christmas, 2 January 2011, based upon the second chapter of Matthew's Gospel. To God be the glory.

Sermon for 2 Christmas

This coming Saturday Grace Church in Everett is doing something. They're being missionaries. Sending themselves forth to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. The only thing they're doing is opening up the door of their church on a January Saturday from 4:30 until 9:00. Their mission for the afternoon is to host a prayer vigil for Sudan.

God has given the people of Grace Church the gift of hospitality for their Sudanese neighbors, and through Daniel Paac, our own friend from South Sudan, God has given Epiphany a similarly powerful call. The gift and power of prayer is often beyond our understanding, yet Christians around the world are asked to pray for the largest country--land wise--in Africa. Why? Because a week from today the people of South Sudan will vote on a referendum to secede establishing themselves as an independent country. The civil war, officially speaking, has been quiet for the past five years. If the referendum passes--which is likely--leaders in the Anglican Communion and the United Nations, and foreign affairs ministries around the globe, worry that government and military officials in North Sudan will resume the violence. So we'll pray. Some people will pray in Everett, Massachusetts; others at Lambeth Palace in London; some will gather in the quiet of their homes.

What about you? Where will you be next Saturday and Sunday?

It was about a year ago when Daniel Paac walked through those doors. The name of the Anglican Church in the Sudan is the Episcopal Church, so when he saw the sign on Church Street, he figured he'd be welcomed. And he was. Without taking anything away from the associate rector's incredible embrace of Daniel I want to say something about your own embrace of Daniel: You've been remarkable, and generous, and open-hearted.

You've been shaped by places, by physical homes and particular pieces of land and of water. So has Daniel, and every other Sudanese person. Their land is no less essential than yours and mine. Having a sense of place and of home is essential to our well-being.

It's always been thus. This second chapter of Matthew is shaped also by a strong sense of place. Matthew is concerned, almost obsessed, with particular places. The first part of the chapter, the part we'll hear this Thursday night, leads us along with the wisemen to Jerusalem where King Herod's advisers read from the ancient scrolls to substantiate the place of Jesus' birth. Afterward they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod with news of the child. Joseph himself has a dream which warns him to take his new child to Egypt, to save him from Herod. Egypt, the place, is not only a safe haven, but also a special place in Matthew's gospel, because of Moses. Remember that? Moses is placed in a basket among the bulrushes and is saved. Egypt connects the Moses and Jesus. For Matthew it's a really important place!

More dreams and eventually Joseph & Mary return to Israel, from one place to another, from Egypt to the district of Galilee to make his home in a town called Nazareth. Matthew doesn't let on about Nazareth being a hometown to Joseph or Mary. Luke is the one who does that for us, not Matthew. It was critical, it seems, for Matthew to show how Jesus came to live in a different place, a place where he would be called a Nazarene.

From Bethlehem to Egypt, from Egypt to Nazareth. All according to the ancient texts, every move in continuity with the promises of God. To our sophisticated modern ears, it can seem like Matthew is over-reaching to prove that Jesus was living where he was supposed to be living.

But place is important for Matthew. Bethlehem was the place of birth; Egypt, the place of refuge. Both important. Nazareth in Galilee was important not only at the beginning, but also at the very end. When the women went to the tomb on Easter morning, they found an angel sitting on the stone that had sealed

the tomb of death. And the angel said to the frightened women, "Do not be afraid ~ Jesus is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples. He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see Him."

Place is important to God. The place where you are now is important to God, even this parish church. God longs to dwell with us, in this particular place.

Friends in Christ Jesus, I want you to know in these days just after Christmas, in this first week of a new year, that Jesus was born so that we would know God is not far off, not in some other place, but here in this place. Wherever you are, Jesus longs to be born there, I am not making it up. This is the word given to us in the very first chapter of Matthew when an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife," the angel said, "for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Then, as he does so often, the gospel writer points to the words of scripture saying, "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel", which means, "God is with us."

Emmanuel, God-is-with-us. Not God will be with us or God was with us. God is with us. In this place. In the Sudan, both the south and the north; in the place where you are now, whether it's filled with joy, or encumbered with anxiety. God is there.

After the resurrection when Jesus brought his disciples to a mountain in Galilee, he gave them instructions for the days ahead, and then he left them there. But Jesus did not leave them in that place without a promise. "And remember I am with you always, to the end of the age." Not I will be with you in some other place. Not I was with you in some distant time. I am with you always. Emmanuel, God-is-with-us in this place. Amen.