

A New Year, A New Paradigm

January 1, 2017

Happy New Year to you! Hope you had a lovely holiday. Any of you make a New Year's Resolution? Over 100 million Americans make New Year's Resolutions, so if you did, you're in good company. For many of us, the new year is an opportunity to reflect back on the past and look forward to the future. I want to begin this morning by reflecting back a bit.

Long, long ago in a galaxy far, far away...I was involved in training and development and an avid student of the latest management and organization theories. When I was working with organizational change, the idea of paradigm shift was popular. The word paradigm originates from the Greek as a scientific term referencing a model or pattern. It came to mean the way we "see" the world – not in terms of our visual sense of sight, but in terms of how we perceive, understand and interpret the world around us. These perceptions create a mental map, and we interpret everything we experience through these mental maps. We seldom question their accuracy. Usually we aren't even aware that we have them. We simply assume that the way we see things is the way things really are.



The duck rabbit: How many of you remember this? If you attended an organizational seminar in the 1990s, I imagine you saw this.



Or the Young Woman/Old Woman

When we experience a paradigm shift, we experience a fundamental change in our underlying assumptions.

Jesus was a master of this – telling stories using well-known objects or events and giving the story a surprising twist so that his listeners' understanding was changed.

So, it's a new year, and perhaps it's time for a new paradigm.

Take for example, Christmas. We anticipate and anticipate it. We celebrate the miracle of the birth of Jesus. Maybe like Scrooge, we resolve that we will honor Christmas in our hearts and try to keep it all year long. And then...Christmas is over. We take down our Christmas trees and put away our nativity scenes until next year and move on to the next thing. There is always something new demanding our attention. Our lives continue and other demands on our time compete for our sustained focus. Christmas is over. Let's move on to the next new thing. But for Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus, their story continued. They had the wise men visiting them, and then they had the long trek to Egypt as refugees fleeing for their lives. Today we're going to look at what

happens to the Holy Family after Christmas is over – we’re going to look at the flight to Egypt.

Our text this morning is from Matthew 2:13-15.

¹³ Now when they (the wise men) had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, 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.” ¹⁴ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

If the Holy Family were fleeing their homeland today, they would have had plenty of company. Over 65 million people last year were refugees, asylum seekers, or displaced persons. This represents one in every 113 people on the planet. We’ve all heard the stories on the news about the unprecedented numbers of refugees; we’ve even seen the heartbreaking photo of the young Syrian boy washed up dead on the shore, but other stories replace them in the news cycle. Other stories demand our attention.

Times of great upheaval like we’ve experienced in the last few years tend to make us fearful, worried about what’s coming next.

The 24-hour news cycle often feeds our fears, showing us image after image after image of death and destruction. Our fears can cause us dig moats and build walls around us to make us feel safe. As we withdraw from others, we may be lonely, but by George, we feel safe. When the future seems too uncertain, too chaotic, too unknown, we often seek refuge and comfort in the past, feeling nostalgic for what seemed like a happier, more optimistic, easier, safer time.

But often that safer, easier time in the past is a fable. Let's return to the story of the Holy Family and their flight to Egypt. Here's one of my favorite paintings, *The Flight Into Egypt* painted in 1609 by Elsheimer.



This painting broke a number of traditions, and had enormous influence on painters like Rembrandt and Rubens. Art historians say this was the first time an artist painted the Holy Family at night, just as Matthew describes it in his gospel. Just think – it took 1600 years for an artist to depict the scene realistically. This is also the first painting to depict the Holy Family as regular people, rather than as supernatural travelers wearing a shining halo.

As you look at the painting notice the groups of three. There are three light sources, the moon, the lantern Joseph is carrying, and

the shepherds' campfire. There are three clumps of trees. Elsheimer may have done away with the overt, conventional trappings of divinity but he beautifully captured the truth of Emmanuel – God with us.

In the center foreground we see the Holy Family, in flight from their homeland in order to protect their baby. The light from Joseph's lantern gives just enough light for us to see Mary, holding Jesus, sitting on a donkey that also carries their few possessions, with Joseph walking beside them.

Let's think for a moment of what this journey meant for Mary and Joseph and their baby Jesus. They are forced to flee a murderous regime intent on genocide. They leave behind every possession that isn't portable or essential to their survival, and take only what they can carry. It's a dangerous journey, where they face attacks from wild animals and bandits and robbers. They are forced to a land that has historic ties to their country – sometimes offering sanctuary, but also enslaving their people. They must leave behind the temple in Jerusalem, the only place where sacrifices are allowed – the only place where you can make atonement for your sin and experience being made right with God. They leave behind everything they know; they leave behind friends and family.

Back to the painting, the shepherds on the far left haven't yet noticed the Holy Family. They are huddled around the campfire with their animals around them, perhaps concentrating on staying warm. The shepherds, like the shepherds in the story of the birth of Jesus, remind us of the many ways in which God brings the outsider, the outcast, into his presence. Perhaps they also serve to remind us of the dramas going on around us in the world...which we may be blind to.

Elsheimer's painting inspires awe in the universe and creates a sense of serenity that seemingly contradicts the anxiety of flight. Both are intentional, according to art historians: They signify the presence of God the Creator, ensuring the Holy Family's escape. It reminds me of Psalm 23: Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil. The Holy Family has to flee the great evil of genocide in order to save their lives...but God journeys with them. One of the reasons I love this painting so much is that it reminds me that even in the midst of our deepest darkness, God is there.

When you hear the word "Egypt" in scripture, what is your first thought? How many of you think of the Israelites in slavery in Egypt? And yet, while Egypt is presented as a place of bondage, it is also presented as a place of sanctuary.



Genesis 12 tells us how Abraham and Sarah found refuge in Egypt from the famine;



Joseph (not the Joseph of our story today but Joseph of the coat of many colors) found his home in Egypt after being sold into slavery by his brothers. Joseph, Mary and Jesus found refuge in Egypt. The text today makes it clear that Egypt provided sanctuary to this refugee family fleeing persecution.



And yet, it's also associated with a time of horrific slavery for the Israelites. Egypt is an intriguing word in the scriptures—slavery and sanctuary. A place of bondage and a refuge. When does the paradigm change? When is Egypt slavery, and when is it sanctuary? Today I want to talk about fear and freedom. Fear enslaves us, cutting us off from God and others; it can create loneliness and often a longing for an idealized past. But we are set free in Jesus Christ, who transforms our slavery into freedom.

The Israelites experienced actual slavery while in Egypt. And even after their miraculous release from slavery, even with God's miraculous provision for them in the wilderness, they continue to struggle with being enslaved. Numbers 11 tells us, "And the people of Israel also wept again and said, "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons,

the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. ⁶ But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.”

The Israelites quickly forgot the weight of their burden in Egypt. In their fear, they were tempted to return to slavery. Their fear blinded them to the reality of their past. Think of your own life for a moment. How often do you think of an earlier time in your life and somehow find yourself thinking that those were the “good old days”? Ecclesiastes 7:10 warns against this tendency, telling us: “Do not say, “Why were the former days better than these?” For you do not inquire wisely concerning this.” We sometimes experience a persistent longing for home, a place where we felt loved and protected; we seek a lost paradise. We do not have paradise but we have our present – if we can let go of an idealized past. Whenever we prefer the pain we know from the old life to the possibility of liberty and new life, we return to slavery.

In times of stress, the Israelites turned to a false view of the past. Most probably fear, fatigue, uncertainty all played a role in causing such a strong reaction. We have an innate fear of the unknown. Sometimes this fear of the unknown makes us long for a familiar routine – even if that routine is slavery.

When we are fearful, or when we are stuck in the past, it is difficult for us to respond to God’s love, and to live into his calling

to be his hands and feet. Fear cuts us off from God and from others. Fear isolates us, creating loneliness.

Loneliness is rampant in our society today. It's being described as a public health hazard. Scientists are finding that loneliness changes the human genome in profound, long-lasting ways. Loneliness is a greater predictor of early death than obesity. Loneliness appears to be as harmful as smoking. Every cigarette package today comes with a warning label that smoking is hazardous to your health, but there are no warning labels for the health hazards of loneliness. It can be difficult to acknowledge you are lonely. The very word "lonely" carries a negative connotation. We often interpret it as a weakness. And yet researchers say loneliness is a signal like feeling thirsty or hungry. Denying we feel lonely makes no more sense than denying we feel hunger. We were created for community. When we are isolated, we feel lonely.

The recent election has stirred up a lot of negative feelings in all of us regardless of who we voted for – we've felt anger, uncertainty, fear. It exposed some deep schisms in our society, and encouraged us to draw divisions between people. Fear is one of the strongest forces cutting us off from God. Fear can blind us to the *imago dei*, the image of God, in each person. Instead of remembering that every person is created in the image of God,

we see evil in the other. Fear can make us act in ways that are against God's nature.

It's hard to see beyond our own personal belief system.

Remember the duck/rabbit paradigm? It's as if you see only the rabbit and I see only the duck. It can be hard to understand the other's point of view.

But we are called to love one another. We are not called to unity in our political beliefs but we are called to love one another. The world said of those early Christians, see how they love one another. I wonder how often this is said about us today. Love, not our politics, must be our defining characteristic. Our salvation does not come from any political party or person; our salvation comes from Jesus Christ. I pray we live as if we believed this.

How do we live as God's people in a world that sometimes feels like it's spinning out of control? Jesus summed this up in Matthew 22 by saying, "'Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.' This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: 'Love others as well as you love yourself' (the Message). His parable with the Good Samaritan, answering the question of who is our neighbor, shows what love in action looks like.

Jesus stresses hospitality to the stranger, perhaps because of his personal experience of being a stranger in a strange land. Jesus reminded his disciples to practice hospitality, saying, I was hungry and you fed me,

I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.'

"Then the righteous are going to say, 'Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?' Then the King will say, 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.' And Jesus has very strong words to say to those who do not do this.

Romans 12:13 tells us the mark of the true Christian is to extend hospitality to strangers. Hebrews 13:1-2 reminds us to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some have entertained angels without knowing it." John, the beloved disciple, encourages us to love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." He reminds us to love one another, because love is from God. We love because God first loved us – even when we were estranged from him.

One of my friends has taken a personal new mission. As she is out and about, she has a new practice, a new rule of life if you will. She practices showing kindness to those who are different than she. For instance, when she sees a woman wearing a headscarf, she smiles and if it is appropriate, says hello. She acknowledges the other, the one who looks different than she, as a person.

We live in a world that is often dark. One out of every 113 people on the planet are refugees. Countless others are homeless. There is addiction, sickness, sadness, evil in the world. But we are to be the light of the world, pointing to the love and grace and mercy of Jesus. The parable of the mustard seed shows us that little things can make a huge difference over time, and can become welcome signs, pointing to the kingdom of heaven. Practice hospitality. Get to know your neighbor. Show kindness to strangers. Pray for others.

The Christian is intended to be an agent of transformation in the world. We are there to radically transform God's world. A small piece of yeast transforms flour into bread to feed a hundred people. If we flee the world because we fear the culture, we leave a void in the world. We are called to be light in the darkness; to feed the hungry; to clothe the naked; to comfort the sick.

We are called to look for God's fresh work; to look forward with anticipation for what God is doing and will do, rather than look back with nostalgia. Our refuge in the nostalgic past can be slavery when it closes us off to God's fresh work. It can be so easy to be like the Israelites, who when freed from slavery, forgot the pains of slavery and grumbled about the food they missed from Egypt. It's a reminder that we are to trust in God – even when our circumstances are radically beyond our control – like

the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, or Mary & Joseph and Jesus having to flee to Egypt for safety.

The Israelites had to spend time in Egypt, and journey through the wilderness to reach the Promised Land. The Holy Family had to leave the Promised Land and journey to Egypt before they could return again. Their journey is our journey. Each of us must spend time in Egypt and in the wilderness in order to become the person God created us to be.

The wilderness is different from the desert. They are not interchangeable terms for the same kind of land. Here's the big difference. The desert receives enough rainfall to sustain life. The wilderness does not. The wilderness is often described as a place of testing and trial, but it can also be a place where we experience God's love for us. He shelters us, protects us. The wilderness can be invitation to rest because only God can sustain life in the wilderness. We are invited to cease our striving. Over the last three years, I've experienced a paradigm shift in my understanding of the wilderness.

Egypt becomes a metaphor for slavery when we are striving for a false image, a false understanding of what we were made to do. Egypt as slavery is about false identities and false narratives.

Our false narratives can create false understandings and false beliefs about God. Dallas Willard writes, "These ideas determine what we can see or hear and how we interpret scripture." Often

the wilderness is an invitation to release these false pictures and beliefs to receive a new understanding of God and who we are in Christ. Sometimes we need new mental maps that more accurately reflect the true nature of God, and the new creation we are in Christ.

In Egypt our identity was linked to what we did. We're called out of Egypt, we're called out of slavery and into freedom in Christ. Our identity is in Christ and we rest in His finished work.

This is an aspirational sermon for me in the sense that I'm still in the process of living into it. I aspire to this; I haven't achieved it. I often feel like I'm living in the wilderness. So please don't hear my words today as something I've checked off my to do list. It's a hope for the new year – it's an anticipation of God's fresh work in my life – it's a request for us to do this together.

Maybe we need a paradigm shift in how we think about what is truly important in our lives. Maybe we need to rethink how we love one another. Maybe we need to new mental maps to help us interpret the world around us.

There's a story I read recently about an encounter on a bus. A man and his kids got on the bus with children screaming and running all over. The father sat down and closed his eyes as if nothing was happening. Everyone on the bus is getting angry at this father with his eyes closed, ignoring his kids. Finally, after everyone was a little ticked off, someone suggested to the father

that he should control his kids. The man opened his eyes and said "oh, I'm sorry, I guess I should. We just came from the hospital where my wife died and I don't know what to do, and the kids aren't taking it too well either." At that instant, perceptions changed and anger and frustration became sympathy for the man. Paradigms shifted.

We often make judgments without knowing the complete story. In the words of Saint Thomas Aquinas, "Do not be quick to assume any situation is as we take it to be," because God's plan is not always clear to us. It's easy to judge someone else, and harder to see how God is working in their life.

The truth is that we cannot see the whole picture but we can trust in God. Evil is a reality in the world...that's why God calls us into his work as agents of reconciliation, as peace makers, as light in the darkness. We do this not as perfect people but as God's people. In the words of one of my favorite songwriters singers, Leonard Cohen, Ring the bells that still can ring, forget your perfect offering, everything is broken, that's how the light gets in.

May the light of Christ shine through our brokenness.