



Sunday, January 1st, 2017

First Sunday after Christmas

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Certainty in Uncertain Times

The Gospel of Matthew makes it clear that Mary, Joseph, and newborn Jesus, were living in uncertain times as Herod plotted to kill the child and they had to move from place to place. The three wise men, following the star that announced Christ's birth, had traveled to see the king of the Jews. On their way to find the baby king, Herod beckoned them to him, and instructed them to let him know when they found this newborn king so that he too could worship him. It was then revealed in a dream to the three wise men by God that they should not go back the same way they came, but find a different route home. When Herod realized his wishes had been ignored, he was furious. In a fit of rage and jealousy he ordered all the baby boys two years old or under, in and around Bethlehem to be killed. Times were uncertain for this young family.

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him about Herod's plans to destroy baby Jesus, and he was told to take Jesus and Mary and flee to Egypt. At that time, Egypt was under the control of the Roman Empire and outside of Herod's jurisdiction. Jesus and his family would be safe from Herod there, but they still had to get there, with a baby whose life was threatened by a king. Times were definitely uncertain.

While the young family was in Egypt, Herod died and an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream once again. The angel told Joseph to "get up," you're moving...again. Take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel. So they started off on the journey. More traveling, more uncertainty.

Herod's son was now ruling in his stead. Archelaus was as nasty as his father and posed a threat to the young family. Again, Joseph was instructed in a dream to go elsewhere. This time they were told to go to Galilee. More traveling, more uncertainty.

Times have not improve much since Herod's rule. Less than a decade ago, there was an international economic meltdown, which has unsettled financial institutions and the job

market. It has devastated personal savings and investments. A humble spirited person recently told me they lost nearly a third of their investments in 2008, and now their future is riddled with doubt, for themselves and their family. Times are uncertain. In recent years, there has been all kinds of natural disasters. These disasters have made a mess of the earth and shattered lives. After speaking with people who live in Washington, IL, I learned that there are still fields that need to be cleaned of debris from the tornado of 2013. It's pretty hard to farm land covered in trash. The Washington Post wrote an article in 2015, bringing attention to the fact that Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota were all found to still be using "redlining." Redlining is the practice of cutting off capital for housing in certain districts, communities, and neighborhoods because of the skin color of the people who live there. Times are uncertain.

The young family of three in the Gospel of Matthew lived in uncertain times, but they also lived with an absolute truth. They lived in the love and protection of God. On three separate occasions God talked to Joseph and moved Jesus, Mary, and Joseph out of harm's way and into a safe place. In this text, we are witness to God's continual care and preservation. God's care and preservation is known as providence. And in the chaos of our time, God's providence gives us certainty. The certainty that God cares and will provide. Just as God provided a safe place for Jesus, Mary and Joseph, God provides for us in tangible ways too.

As some churches today struggle to define their purpose and mission, how they can join with their community, their neighbors and share the good news of God's love for all people, God has provided for First Federated Church a practical way to do so. The Life Together Center, located just across the parking lot, is well situated for community outreach and mission: Vacation Bible School, Logos, Bible Study, the Community Foundation, the list goes on and on all happen in that building.

The building itself reminds us of two things. First, we are called, to serve God and in doing so we care for people and tend to them. The Summer Vacation Bible School held in the LTC is a mixture of children. Some are from the church and some are from the community. No matter if they are children of members or not, the LTC provides them a space to learn about God and grow in their love for God. Through God's provision we share God's love with our children and our neighbors. Second, the building reminds us that God provides for God's people the tools they need to carry out the kingdom work of God here on earth. God provides! That we can be certain of.

Another tangible way we are reminded of God's love, care, and provision is in communion. In the bread and juice, we are reminded of God's provision through his son Jesus Christ, who was sent from God into a world. A world of uncertain times. The Father

established a new eternal covenant of grace, care, and reconciliation. At this table, we join with the same Christ who has promised to be with us always, even to the end of the world. Uncertain times or not, God is watching over us and providing for us. As we come to the Lord's Table, this table, this morning, we do so in the knowledge that the bread and the juice are a pledge and foretaste of God's love, care, and providence. Here, we can be certain.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Invitation to the Lord's Table.