

# Sermon for December 26, 2010 ~ Christmas 1

## Matthew 2:13-23

Remember “connect the dots?” They were those puzzles that you may have done as a child. The dots were numbered and there were spaces between them. Sometimes if the puzzle was complicated a few lines were also added to help with the final shape.

You drew a line from dot 1 to dot 2 to dot 3 and so on. And by the time you were finished you had drawn a giraffe or a house or a bicycle. It was fun because at first it wasn't at all clear.

Life can be like that. We live in between the “dots” – the moments of our lives. At first we move from one moment to the next and we don't really understand what is going on or what the final result will be. But if we don't give up in frustration and keep moving along, life can take on its own shape.

In the Christmas story, Bethlehem was dot 1, and then the lines moved all over the place before the picture started coming together...

## A tough beginning

Starting out in life has its challenges. Remember when you set out on your own? Some of you were teenagers, some of you had no choice, some of you travelled to another country, and some of you were all on your own. Mary and Joseph set out from the Nazareth area (where Mary's people were from) to Bethlehem because of the census demand. That is about 80 km – a long walk. They managed the struggle of getting there, went through all the stress and uncertainty of the birth. No mid-wife, no mom, no mother-in-law to help. No medical assistance. No stove. No hot water. But they got through it. Mary would have had to remain in Bethlehem for the 6 week period of purification before going anywhere else, so I wonder if they didn't start thinking about setting down roots.

Joseph would find them a place – probably the next day. Then what about food and work? Remember when you had your first child – you did anything, tried anything to set up a good life. The baby sets it all in motion: a nice clean home, a job – even with long hours, family time.

After the initial fuss that was made over the baby Jesus – shepherds babbling about angels singing in the field, people gathering to come and see, the word of mouth grapevine took off... and that may have helped them find better accommodation. Then the wise men showed up to provide the baby shower and the gifts were substantial! The word of a special baby in the neighborhood got around.

The news of the baby became a threat to the king. Those important men from the east got his attention and Herod, who was suspicious by nature, became unnerved. His men started investigating. The neighbors mentioned it to each other. There were questions at work. Maybe the rumor was that they were going to round up all the kids for some kind of review. Herod's reputation for brutality was well known. Joseph begins to wonder if Bethlehem is such a good place to be, “*What's best for the baby? I'm not sure ... I'm not sure...*” Then the nightmare: “*Get going! FLEE TO EGYPT!*”

*Martin Luther makes the following comment: Joseph awoke and he did not think to himself, 'There is no need to get started tonight. I will wait a couple of weeks, especially with a wife and child' but he said, 'I cannot wait until daylight. Wake up, Mary, wake up! I am afraid your secret is out. Let's be gone, that those who seek us may not find.'... Joseph must have hurried in great concern, but he said to himself, 'He who told me to go will lead me.' He did not take time to put away anything in the house, but left everything.*

Joseph knew whose hands they were in, but in this tough beginning, the little family still experienced all this stress. An uncertain destination, family upset, safety concerns, political issues – lots of those “moments” there. Where did they go in Egypt? We don't know. Maybe to Alexandria? There were about one million Jews there at the time... a large community.

*In this world children are still abused, they are bought and sold, made into soldiers... and can have other terrible beginnings. Families can be targeted because of race, income, background, or ethnicity. A friend of mine who travels to and from Rwanda told me after he came back from his last trip where he had seen the killing fields, and the huts full of bones, and maimed people – “I will never, never again say anything negative about any group of people. It can lead to such horror.”*

There was horror in Bethlehem after the family left – just like such things that happen in our world today. But the dots came together for Joseph and he knew they had to leave.

## **Life**

They got out and the terrible violence in the local Bethlehem area did not find the child. Nor did it make the news, because it was just another vicious act by Herod. Like so many countries with human rights abuses, power politics were at play. The weak must serve the interests of those with power or suffer. This is the nature of the sinful world into which Jesus has come.

If the family went to Alexandria, they would have found a strong worshipping community, possibly extended family, a safe home life, friends, and job opportunities – maybe in the carpentry field. And a few years go by. Jesus walks now and is talking. He plays. Mary and Joseph start talking about expanding the family. But they are also homesick. Jesus needs his grandma and grandpa. But when? How? Where is it safe? Then the news arrives of Herod's death and in a quieter dream Joseph is assured: *“Okay, time to go home.”*

## **A Tough Ending**

For Luther, the cradle and the cross were never too far apart. So it is not surprising in this “connect the dots” picture that there is a need for the family to get back home. The child needs to grow up. There is work for him to do.

And as the background of the world's power and craziness continue – so does prayer. Archelaus, the son of Herod, who was not much better than he, was in charge of that south. Joseph was afraid and probably prayed, *“Now what Lord?”* As he awakens from sleep he has the assurance that it would be better to return to Mary's people in the north... back to Nazareth where this all started. That would be country life. Nice for the family. A good place to set up a shop. They could live there. They could make the most of life's moments. Joseph may have died there later on. We don't know – but this is the last time we hear from him.

And so they became Nazoreans. And that connect the dots puzzle comes to completion back to where it started. They marked life's the moments just like you have done with your family. So many pictures, mementos and reminders are on your shelves at home. These are the dots to which your life connects.

Most of the gold was gone. Big moves and resettling are costly. But maybe Mary still had the frankincense and myrrh. The frankincense was a fragrant offering to God; and the myrrh was for pain relief and burial. These would yet symbolize the life of Jesus.

Jesus moves from the cradle to the cross. He goes there for us, well-acquainted with stress and struggle, pain, worry and loss... and because of these dots in his life, the picture that he draws reminds us that God is with us at such times too. Amen.