

Sermon for The Longest Night, 12/21/2019, St. David's Episcopal Church (Matthew 2:12-23)

I describe the Longest Night as a Christmas service, but the solstice always falls in Advent, a season better suited for Longest Night, with its liturgical color of blue, and its theme of waiting. Waiting for diagnosis, waiting for surgery, waiting to find out what's next for a loved one. Waiting to feel better. Waiting for pain from missing loved ones to pass.

Any of these things changes us. The Longest Night allows us to look back at what was and how we thought things could be. Society encourages us not to have regrets, but tonight we can honor our regrets, our sadness during this dark time of year.

Tomorrow, the readings at church focus on Mary and Joseph. I suspect that before Jesus was born, Mary must have spent some time reflecting on, if not mourning, the possibility of a shame-free life. Same for Joseph. People will judge them. She was pregnant before she should have been. Everyone knows he's not the father. But I bet when Mary and Joseph held Jesus, their regrets for what might have been were lifted. That first Christmas must have been magical.

But they didn't get to stay in that bubble. Tonight's Gospel helps us understand more sorrows that came to the Holy Family. This reading is the second sorrow of Mary in the seven sorrows rosary: the flight to Egypt.

Imagine what life was like for Mary and Joseph in Egypt. Egypt was a place with a lot of emotional baggage for Jews like Mary and Joseph. Moses led the people out of Israel, and now they are willingly walking back in. Maybe people there wouldn't gossip about Jesus' parentage, but they got a whole new set of problems. They were foreigners. Jews. In Egypt. They were poor. They probably didn't know the language. It was an exile. Imagine, being new parents, far away from everything you've ever know, fleeing from a terrifying tyrant who wants to kill your baby.

Joseph was a carpenter, and they got by, obviously, because then the Bible tells us that an angel came to Joseph again. Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those seeking the child's life are dead. But they still could not go back to Judea, because they feared Herod's son. So they went to Galilee, to Nazareth, and made a home there. Another new place. At least they knew the language this time.

Those words—"at least"—if you're at a Longest Night service, then you know how annoying those words can be. At least he didn't suffer. At least it's not stage 4. At least she lived a long life. At least it wasn't your right hand. At least you still have a job. At least you have each other.

When I pray the sorrows rosary, I wonder about this second sorrow. Was Mary's personal sorrow subsumed by the horror of the slaughter of the innocents? Was her sorrow survivors' guilt? When they did return, what did people think about them having a child, when so many had lost theirs due to Herod?

Tonight we have an opportunity to write down our sorrows, on these pieces of rice paper, which you are invited to bring to the altar during communion and place in the bowl of water. I wish we

could make the things that are heavy in our hearts dissolve the way the paper will dissolve. Even though we can't, I find this act cathartic every year.

The constant through Mary and Joseph's experience being exiled to Egypt and then returning to a new place was that Christ with them. Christ incarnate, as a child that needed protecting. When times are dark and confusing, one thing I know is that Christ is always with us: no longer as a helpless infant, but as a presence that will never leave.