

Caught but Free
Christmas 2: Matthew 2.13-15,19-23
January 2, 2022
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Corry was an unemployed carver of saints and angels whose gift was of no interest to the world. Or at least of no monetary value in the Irish village where he and his wife Nuala lived. The two were poor, but an opportunity lay just around a year-long bend for Corry. One which might provide a living for them that wasn't entirely disconnected from his gift. O'Flynn, the stone carver, had recognized Corry's skill and offered him an apprenticeship chiseling tombstones. The catch was that there would be no pay for the first year.

To live a year without income was impossible for the couple. So Nuala convinced Corry to go see Mrs. Falloway. It took a lot for Corry to swallow his pride and agree. It was Mrs. Falloway who had lent them money to buy the house and patch of land where they lived, and they had not yet been able to begin paying her back.

Mrs. Falloway had helped them with the house because, even though she was an English Protestant, years ago she'd been impressed by the sculptures at a Catholic funeral. And soon thereafter, she began evangelizing priests and bishops to hire local craftsmen to create new furnishings and carvings for their churches. It didn't work. Even so, Mrs. Falloway was certain that her loan to Corry and Nuala would one day be a credit to her when the rest of the world — or the rest of the county, at least — recognized Corry's gift for what it was.

Sadly, the plans of no one in this story materialized as they hoped they would. Corry did make the trip to see Mrs. Falloway, but when he reached her house he found it, and her, in a much shabbier condition. She graciously told him she'd never intended for him to pay her back for the house, but also that she couldn't help now because her money was all gone.

Unbeknownst to Corry, Nuala set out on a mission of her own as soon as he'd boarded the bus for Mrs. Falloway's. In the night she'd remembered about the Rynnes, a wealthy local couple who hadn't been able to have children of their own. She paid Etty Rynne a visit, and, after pleasantries, proposed having Etty and her husband adopt the child Nuala was pregnant with at the time. She had three others, and no one would have to know about the money. The offer was excruciating, much as Etty and her husband longed for a child. But she knew the plan wouldn't work. The town was too small. People would talk. Business would dry up. The women were caught in circumstances they couldn't control. And for the remainder of the story, none of the circumstances anyone was confronting would change.

The Rynnes continue childless, Nuala returns penniless to her children, and Corry turns down O'Flynn's apprenticeship at the stone yard, buying a pair of boots and taking the job on the road crew instead. If there's any redemption to be had in the story, it won't be because anyone's figured out how change the way things are in their lives in any material way.

Which, it's probably high time I told you, is part of what makes this a quintessential William Trevor story. His characters, in all their great variety, are so often caught within circumstances they cannot change. Which means if anything important happens, it almost always happens within these limitations, not because someone found a way to break free of them.

You might question using a piece of short fiction to investigate the meaning in the story of Mary and Joseph and their infant son fleeing Herod into Egypt. But meaning always happens by means of story, doesn't it? And usually it happens when we lay one story next to another one. It's true of the various stories within scripture, in their ongoing conversation with one another. It's just as true when we look at the stories of our lives through the lens of scripture, or even as we look back at scripture through the stories we're living out. If you didn't believe this is so when this sermon began, I hope you'll give me the benefit of your doubts for a few more minutes.

Because what reading about the hardships of a poor Irish couple pointed me toward in today's gospel reading is simply that the holy family is also very much caught in a world that will not change its cruel and unjust ways for their sake. Remember that Mary and Joseph had made their way to Bethlehem for Jesus's birth because they'd been herded there like lowing cattle themselves by an emperor who wanted to count how many humans his empire controlled. They were caught, whether Mary was bearing the Light of the World in her womb or not.

And, sure, it's cool that angels appear to Joseph in dreams, just as they did to the magi, warning when it was time to flee Herod and again when it was safe to return home. But there's a way in which the dreams only emphasize further that the world just kept on being the world. The warning is nice, but how come Herod gets to keep on being terrible Herod until he dies, for all we know, on his throne at a ripe old age?

From the beginning of Jesus's story, it's clear that, in spite of Israel's hope for a messiah who would deliver them definitively from the circumstances of their lives, we see their savior and ours caught in the same world that they and we are caught in. Redemption, the story tells us from its onset, will not come by way of a conquering hero or by one who transcends the limits the rest of us live confined by. Redemption, whatever it is in this story, will come from within those confines.

This is not to say that God, or the stories of scripture are not concerned with the material conditions of human lives. Nor is it to say that Christians shouldn't be concerned with changing the material conditions of the people in this world who are most vulnerable to and damaged by its violent powers. Quite the opposite. Incarnation is all about God being present to us within such conditions. It's about God being subject to them and exposed to them fully in Jesus.

But a central truth of the gospel story is that if we hang our identities, even as people of justice and mercy and the way of Jesus ... if we let our deepest identities before God rest on the conversion or downfall of the Herods of this world, we're bound to lose heart. And this is very much something folks like us at Calvary must confront truthfully as we try to minister to the needs of God's most vulnerable children. We could very well lose heart, because, look around. Herods are still in charge. People are still scurrying across borders and suffering chaos and damage because the rules are still made to serve the ends and egos of the ones in power. Not the ones who are just caught.

The Christian good news is that a different kind of hope is available to us from within a world in which God lives and acts among the people who don't get to write the rules. In fact, read all the stories of our scriptures. It is consistently through the lives of people most caught and least in control that God comes to us. God comes to us through the ones scurrying away from Herod into Egypt. Grace and hope and new life is available to us through them. Grace and hope and new life is available to them, in spite of Herod's continued grip on the levers of power.

There really is a different story you and I can still form our lives by the light of. It's a story about finding a freedom from the ways of this world even while we're trapped as much within its circumstances as anybody else. A freedom that comes from learning Jesus's way of nonviolent love. His way of mercy for and embrace of and even curiosity about the ones who are outcast and powerless. His way of radical forgiveness, which is about not pretending the circumstances of our past can be changed or undone, but not granting the past the power to reign mercilessly over the present either. A redeeming way really is offered to us, not apart from our histories, but from right here within them, insofar as we trust a different story from the ones the Herods keep writing new versions of.

"It's how it is," Corry said when he rejected O'Flynn's offer at the stoneyard. He said it again when he went to work on the roads. And Nuala found it absurd that a barren wife and a statue maker, "robbed by adverse circumstances of his purpose in God's world," should live within a mile of each other. A fresh anger at the injustice of it all opened in her, an anger she nursed, even as she determined not to let her children, or even her husband know about. She tamped down the rage as she went about her chores and Corry headed off for his first day on the job he didn't want.

Once she had the house to herself, she fed the chickens and stepped into Corry's workshop. And the story ends like this: "...She remained longer than she usually did on her morning visits to the saints who had become her friends: St Laurence with his gridiron, St Gabriel the messenger, St Clare of Assisi, St Thomas the Apostle, and blind St Lucy, St Catherine, St Agnes. Corry had made them live for her and she felt the first faint slipping away of her anger as they returned her gaze with undisturbed tranquility. Touched by it, lost in its peace, she sensed their resignation too. The world, not she, had failed."

And so one story presses a question upon another story which presses a question upon us. If anger or resentment is what builds in us from living in a world that so often will not change to suit our needs or heal our hurts, is a truthful form of tranquility still possible for us? A peace that passes understanding perhaps? Is there even a kind of resignation, if you will, that refuses to accept that that the powers of this world get to define ultimately who we are and how we live?

The gospel says that there is if we trust a different story than the one the world keeps telling us. Because the world is what has failed. Not the ones the world calls failures just because they aren't in control. The world has failed. Not the way of love that's stayed alive in spite of it all. The world has failed, but God has not. Which to any creature caught within this world's failures, is the beginning of the good news that they are precisely the ones God still loves fiercely and still deems worthy to dwell incarnate among. And that a new life, a form of freedom even, truly is available to all of us, not once Herod finally gets knocked for good from his throne, but in the way of Jesus today.