Earlier this week, at the invitation of President Obama, the Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, visited the USS Arizona Memorial in Pearl Harbor to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack during WWII. The infamous kamikaze style attack by the Japanese killed more than 2,400 Americans on the Naval base and officially dragged the US into war with the Empire of Japan. Prior to Pearl Harbor, Japan had already conquered much of Asia and had viciously killed nearly 2 million innocent civilians all across Asia. Many civilians, including my grandparents, my mother, and five of her siblings, were forced to flee from the coastal cities and took refuge in the mainland villages. These horrific memories and wounds are still fresh on my mother’s mind even though she was only about 6-7 years old at the time.

As my mother recalls, much of her experience was nothing but a “bad dream” that she could not find herself waking up from and snapping out of it. Times were tough when there were no foods and where there was no place to rest, but they were grateful to be alive and to be together, thanks to God’s protection and provision.

You see, my mom was nearly taken away into custody by a Japanese commander after she was forcefully snatched out of my grandmother’s arm. Like any mother would, my grandmother resisted and refused to let my mother or any one of her 6 children go. Because of her resiliency, she was able to keep all of her children with her through the war. But who knew what might have happened, if it wasn’t for my grandmother’s courage and bravery to fight back? Perhaps I might never have been born either.

My mother’s family was fortunate that many of them were able to stay together through the war, but that was not the case for millions of others whose families were scattered, missing, or were never to be found again.

 In the passage that we just read earlier from the Gospel of Matthew, we heard about another family’s nightmare horror story of fleeing for their safety. This event came immediately after the Wise Men’s visit a year or so after the baby Jesus had been born. Through a series of dreams as revealed by the angels, Joseph was warned that he must take his family away from Bethlehem, as quickly as possible, because Herod had ordered a bounty on their child who was born to be the future King of Israel. Herod wasn’t taking any chances after learning this news of the born of the newborn King from the Wise Men. Herod ordered all male and female children 2 years or younger to be slaughtered just to be sure. This only goes to show how cruel Herod was. ***"A voice was heard in Ramah,***

***wailing and loud lamentation,***

***Rachel weeping for her children;***

***she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."[[1]](#footnote-1)***

Suddenly Joseph and Mary found themselves on the run, fearing for their lives as well as the life of their young infant child. Like any parents, they would do anything and everything possible to keep him safe. As the angels told Joseph through a dream that they must flee to Egypt where they would be safe because there would be out of Herod’s jurisdiction. Overnight, they became refugees in exile looking for a place to stay at the mercy and generosity of others.

Without a doubt, Joseph and Mary were terrified from all of this ordeal. But they were willing to do whatever the LORD told them to do and to go wherever the LORD was sending them. They took on much risks and a giant leap of faith, while trusting in the LORD’s guidance and protection. It may not be where they want to be, in Bethlehem where all is calm and all is bright, but that’s not what God had in mind for them. God has arranged other plan for them in order to see God’s ultimate plan come to fruition.

 There is a hymn in our pew hymnal – Hymn #154 that captures the theme of our story today. Hymn #154 is entitled ***“Jesus Entered Egypt”*.**  The tune may be a bit unfamiliar, perhaps in the future we will try this one day. But I really appreciate the lyrics that were written as it captured the essence of our gospel lesson this morning. The lyrics go like this:

***#154 Jesus Entered Egypt***

***Jesus entered Egypt fleeing Herod's hand,
living as an alien in a foreign land.
Far from home and country with his family,
was there room and welcome for this refugee?***

***Jesus was a migrant living as a guest
with the friends and strangers who could offer rest.
Do we hold wealth lightly so that we can share
shelter with the homeless, and abundant care?***

***Jesus crosses borders with the wandering poor,
searching for a refuge, for an open door.
Do our words and actions answer Jesus' plea:
"Give the lowly welcome, and you welcome me"***

On our liturgical season calendar, the 1st Sunday of the New Year is traditionally known as Epiphany Sunday. The word Epiphany in Greek – means **“shining forth”** or **“manifestation”** signifies the “**revealing**” of Christ to God’s people throughout, not just for the Jews but for the Gentiles as well. The day of Epiphany marks the coming and the sending of the three wise men who responded to God’s calling bringing the newborn child gifts of gold, myrrh, and frankinscence, which symbolized the future status of this Christ-child as the King, the Priest and the Sacrifice. Epiphany also “reveals” to us, through the arrival of the Messiah child, this was all part of God’s plan of salvation for ALL of humanity.

**Unfortunately, it was also part of God’s plan that innocent blood was shed in order to preserve the life of this Messiah child. This child would eventually grow up to retribute his own innocent blood for the salvation of ALL humankind, including yours and mine.** **All for One and One for ALL.**

Furthermore, we come to realize that **all things that happen are part of God’s larger plan and provision for humanity.** On this 1st dawn of the new year, full of optimism and good will, may we allow ourselves a time to rededicate our hope and our faith, as we look ahead to the new opportunities and new challenges of what lies ahead.

In this coming year, some of us may be challenged with the prospect of new adventures and new journeys in life…graduation, transition into new school, new job, or perhaps new relationships? Some of us may have to face certain medical crises or even losses of loved ones within our families. These are all challenges in our lives that call for our faith to be tested. But time after time, God has reassured us that God remains firmly in control of all things, in spite of what we think or see. God’s plan is still much greater than ours. **God has promised to maintain His vigil in protecting those who are faithful to their calling, especially during times of uncertainties and fears.**

As the book of Romans reminds us that *“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. 31 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who [can be] against us?”[[2]](#footnote-2)* These are God’s word of assurance for us on this 1st day of the new year. God’s got our back on His side no matter what life may bring.

In the same way, every time we come before this table of grace, we proclaim God’s presence is with us through the Word spoken and the Word made alive through Jesus Christ. God’s spirit lives in us whether during time of peace or threat of wars, violence, and in the midst of chaos. Whether we are in the comfort of our home or being scattered in exile, whether we are fully embraced in God’s love or have encounter a few spiritual bumps along the way, God reassured us that as long as we place our trust in Him, we remain within God’s constant vigilance and care.

This house of God is a “safe place” for anyone who desires to experience the fullness of God. When we come before God’s table of grace, we leave our fear and our doubts behind. We come to rediscover our sense of belonging once again. We come because God has beckoned us regardless of where we may be on our journey of faith, whether we are immigrants, or refugees seeking shelters and asylums just like Joseph, Mary, and the infant child Jesus. All of us are welcomed at this table and in God’s house of prayer and worship.

To some of us, the year 2016 might seemed like a **“Bad Dream”** that simply refuses to go away. We can’t wait soon enough for 2017 to start off on the right foot. Not only must we flip the calendar but we must turn the page and move forward. We must let go of things that might be holding us back. We must wake up, snap ourselves out of it, and forget about the “bad dream” that we might have just had.

Are we willing to take this leap of faith, and embark on a new journey to go wherever God wants us to go, just like Joseph, Mary and the holy infant child?

One by one, the characters gathered at the manger scene will depart and the star will dissipate. The animals, the shepherds and the wise men will also soon be gone. Likewise for Joseph, Mary, and the baby, they too must not stay there for too long. We’re not meant to keep admiring at the Nativity scene, because that’s not where Christ will ultimately achieve His greatest glory. God wanted the shepherds and the wise men to go back out where they came from, by telling others about the newborn Savior king who was born for the salvation of ALL of humanity. God wanted Joseph, Mary, and the infant child Jesus to go to Egypt for a few years, and then returned and settled in the region of Galilee where the people are. In the same way, after we have come to the manger, we too have been commissioned to share with others of what we’ve seen. This newborn king has given us a new dream with new hope and a new life.

Indeed, God has a bigger plan with many dreams and hopes in store for our future, if we simply let go of our personal security and allow God’s Epiphany moment to be revealed to us one step at a time. The angels will continue to be standing by our side reminding us “***Do Not Be Afraid***!” because “God is with us” - Emmanuel.

As the LORD declared through the prophet Jeremiah, “*For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.[[3]](#footnote-3)* Great is God’s Faithfulness!

May this Christ candle be our guiding light that would not only lead us to the manger but to send us away from it, to places where God’s new life of a savior and God’s new hope of salvation need to be proclaimed. Thanks be to God. In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *Matthew 2:18* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Romans 8:28-31* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Jeremiah 29:11-13* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)