

Trinity Lutheran Church
Matthew 2.13-15, 19-23
First Sunday after Christmas

This sermon was preached by Pr. Ned Lenhart on December 30, 2007.

Place...is such an important thing.

As my sister lie in her hospital bed taking her last breaths, while none of us wanted to do it, we all knew we had to ask her a difficult but important question: what would you like done with your body?

Asking it was hard for several reasons. Most importantly, it was admitting those treating her knew her time was growing short and there was now no hope.

I was the brother – the pastor – so I got the short straw. As gently & seriously as I could I asked Nan, “Where would you like to be buried? Here in Oregon...or back home in Montana?”

She only thought a moment. “I want to be cremated,” she said, between much-labored breaths. “And I want my ashes spread up in the park.”

Just a week later we were back in Montana – the funeral service over – our small family gathered in the area Zion Lutheran Church worships in Makoshika Park – the one & only place Nan had said she wanted to celebrate her wedding.

The wind blowing through the tall Ponderosa Pines, I looked over & there stood my dad cradling the cardboard box of ashes – what was left of his daughter.

The pastor led us through the interment liturgy, until it was time for the committal. And then my father opened the box and taking scoops of ashes out with his big hands, tossed

them to the earth as the words of committal were spoken:

“Here in this place, we commend her to Almighty God, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

The second chapter of Matthew’s gospel too, is shaped by a strong sense of place.

It begins in Jerusalem, with King Herod’s advisors reading to him a centuries old prophecy from Micah, telling where the birth of the Messiah would occur:

“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.” Matthew 2.6

Bethlehem. That was the place. Quickly confirmed by a star, which led the travelers – three wise men – toward that tiny town so that they might worship the newborn savior.

Bethlehem is not a safe place though. The travelers are warned in a dream not to return to Jerusalem & Herod with news of the child. Joseph too is warned in a dream to leave & go to another place: Egypt. A place with special meaning. For it was another prophet – Hosea – who proclaimed that the messiah must come from there: *“Out of Egypt I have called my son.” Matthew 2.15*

Mary, Joseph & Jesus – they do not stay in this place long though. Again in a dream, Joseph is instructed to return to Israel – the land of Promise. So they go to another place. To the district of Galilee to make their home in a town called Nazareth.

In Luke's gospel we are led to believe that Joseph & Mary's hometown is someplace other than Bethlehem – for they had to travel there for the census. We get no such sense in Matthew's gospel. Matthew would have us believe that Bethlehem was their hometown, but that it would not remain so. It was important for Matthew to show how Jesus came to live in another place. An important place. So that yet a third prophecy, this one from Isaiah, might be fulfilled of the baby Jesus:

“He will be called a Nazarene.”
Matthew 2.23

Place is so important to Matthew! Bethlehem – it was so important as the place of birth. Egypt – it was so important as the place of refuge. Nazareth of Galilee – it was so important as the place of Jesus' ministry.

Place is also important to God. The place where we live...is important to God. A large city where you barely know your neighbors? A small town or rural area where everyone knows everyone's business? A military base where you seem far you're your 'real' home? That place, wherever it is, is important to God. For God longs to dwell with you there – in that place.

This is the message of God's Word in Matthew: Jesus was born so that we would know God is not far off – in some other place – but is here with us in THIS place.

Emmanuel – God is with us. That's what the savior is called in the very first chapter of Matthew's story of Good News. God is with us. Not, God will be with us....or, God was with us. God is with us. Here. In this place.

What is that place for you? Perhaps not physically, but spiritually. Emotionally.

Is it a place of joy? Excitement? New life? A birth? A marriage? A new home? A new relationship? God is with you...in that place.

Is it a place of wondering? Questions? Waiting? Hoping? Searching? God is with you...in that place.

Or...is it a place of suffering? Brokenness? Hurting? Tears? Loss? Death. God is with you...in that place.

At the very end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus takes his disciples to a mountain in Galilee. He gives them some instructions on the days ahead, then leaves them there, but not without a promise:

“And remember,” he says, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”
Matthew 28.20

I am with you always. I am Emmanuel – God with us: On the street where you know every persons name. In the nursing home.....or army tent with photos on the night stand & memories deep in your heart. In the apartment building where Christmas lights still twinkle on fire escapes. In barren Eastern Montana hillsides, strewn with the ashes of loved ones. Emmanuel. God is with us. Here - in this place.
 Amen