

Get Up and Go: #morelife
Matthew 2:1-23
January 3, 2021

From its very beginning, the story of Jesus has a cast of unlikely characters: an old couple beyond childbearing years, a virgin, a carpenter, shepherds. Then came magi from a place far away, with a different culture and religious practices. Guided by a star, these figures from a foreign land traveled a long distance to meet the Christ child, even to worship him. To the “powers that be,” they spread the news of the birth of a “King.”

“But there is already a King in the land, and that King is me,” thought King Herod as he heard of the magi’s inquiry. In an authoritarian hierarchy, there can be only one King. Herod was paranoid about his position. Although he was a practicing Jew, his ancestry was Arab. To the Judeans over whom he ruled, Herod was not sufficiently Jewish to be their leader. To put it mildly, Herod had no real right to be “king of the Jews.” He was king solely because of his relationship with the Romans. He gained the title “Great” because of his massive building projects, including rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem.

Always haunted by the potential threat to his power, Herod suffered great inner turmoil. He was fearful that even his own family members would usurp his throne, so he murdered many of them, including his wife, her two sons, and his firstborn son. He knew his power was on shaky ground and could be challenged by anyone who had more right to rule than he did.

Therefore, it is not hard to imagine Herod’s terror at the announcement that an authentic King of the Jews had been born. This child of Jewish descent was from the line of King David and born in the city of David, Bethlehem. This news sent Herod into a defensive frenzy.

The magi caught on to this dynamic. After meeting Jesus and his family, they left for home by another route instead of returning to Jerusalem as Herod had requested. Infuriated by the magi’s lack of cooperation, Herod set out to remove this competitor King.

This is where the angel entered, appearing again to Joseph in a dream. The angel said, “Get up and go, flee to Egypt to save the child from the wrath of Herod.” Driven by his insatiable drive for power, Herod enacted a genocide. Although there is no other historical record of this event, scholars estimate that there might have been around 20 children under the age of two in Bethlehem at the time.

The opposite of Life that arises from fear is apathy. Herod showed a total disregard for human life and dignity. He regarded these children, their families, and community as less than human.

In awakening Joseph to the threat to Jesus' life, the angel was an advocate for life. As a messenger of God, the angel demonstrated that God is about saving life, not extinguishing life. The forces that appear to undermine the gift of life are not in alignment with the will of God.

As the angel roused Joseph to take prompt action to save his family's life, in the midst of a global pandemic, we are called to take all the actions we can to protect life. The prophet Micah said, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). We have been told what is necessary for the public health of all: thou shalt wear masks; thou shalt wash thy hands for two minutes while twice singing "Happy Birthday" or the "Doxology;" thou shalt maintain six feet between people; thou shalt not gather with people outside your household. We hold fast to these actions to save our own lives and the lives of others.

But some appear to be apathetic, uninterested in following public health guidelines. Some are entrenched in individualism and they refuse to compromise their personal rights for the good of all.

Jesus followed the tradition of biblical prophets who called people to participate in the creation of an alternative social reality. We need not abide an economic engine that tramples the poor so the rich can live in glamorous mansions. In fact, the biblical prophets advocate for debt cancellation (Deut. 15:1-18), loans without interest (Deut. 23:19-20); and a generous safety net for the disadvantaged (Deut. 24:17-22). Some might say this is mixing politics and religion, but politics is about the well-being of the people. The biblical prophets speak to the social and economic well-being of the people. They call God's people to act with agency to "choose life so that you and your descendants may live" (Deut. 30:19b).

As we embark upon a new year, we must heed the call of the angel – to shake off apathy, to awaken from our sleep, to "get up" and act. With Joseph, we can choose to act with agency to save the lives of those who are vulnerable. Joseph's son came to save the lives of many, to open new futures for those whose circumstances trapped them in despair. Disciples of Jesus are empowered and expected to get up and go exercise agency in generating new possibilities for the good of all.

Mary Doria Russell's book, *A Thread of Grace: A Novel*, is a remembrance of the generous Italians of every stripe who protected Jews in the midst of the Holocaust. An elder, Iacopo, delivers this reflective affirmation:

"The Holy One has made us His partners, the sages teach. He gives us wheat, we make bread. He gives us grapes, we make wine. He gives us the world. We make of it what we will – all of us together. When the preponderance of human beings choose to act with justice and generosity and kindness, then learning and decency prevail. When the preponderance of human beings choose power, greed, and indifference to suffering, the world is filled with war, poverty, and cruelty. Bombs do not drop from God's hand. Triggers are not pulled by God's finger. Each of us chooses, one by one, and God's eye does not turn from those who suffer or from those who inflict suffering. Our choices are weighed. And, thus, the nations judged."ⁱ

We humans have the capacity to choose a better future, one that generates a better life for those who are vulnerable and marginalized. The either/or of the elder is clear:

Either: justice, generosity, kindness,

Or: power, greed, indifference to suffering.

I admire the work of Jesuit priest, Father Greg Boyle, who leads the largest gang intervention, rehab, and reentry program on the planet. "Father G" as he is known by the homies, has helped countless men, women, and teens find more life after gang life, substance abuse, and dysfunctional family lives threatened their well-being.

Homeboy Industries employment services are able "to place Alvaro, after his eighteen months with them, as a general-labor shipper at a fabric company. Several weeks into the job, he notices the database the company uses for shipping is one he's familiar with from a previous experience. He lets his boss know. When he's asked where he learned it, he takes a deep breath and responds, tentatively, "When I was locked up?" His boss asks to see [this expertise]. So Alvaro shows him. He navigates the database with ease, and two days later the boss hands him an envelope, which he thinks for sure are his marching papers. Instead, it is notice of a \$5.75 hourly raise, effective immediately."ⁱⁱ

It is within our power to partner with God to generate an alternative future for ourselves, for others, for our nation and our world. We can claim the courage of the wise men to travel down a different path, to blaze a new trail instead of the well-worn path that has discounted so many precious lives. We can claim the

agency of Joseph to risk a bold escape to a foreign land in order to save the life of a child, who would save the lives of many.

As we embark upon a new year, many are anxious to “get back to normal.” But we’ve learned that the former things were not equitable and just for all. This is our opportunity to create new systems that generate livelihood, equity, and the abundant life God desires for all.

Let us get up and go forward, collaborating with God in the work of salvation, the work of generating more life that all God’s people might flourish.

Eternal Mystery, we are grateful for the faithful reminder of scripture that you are in the business of saving lives. You offer us the precious gift of life and you desire that all might flourish. Forgive us for ways in which the spark of life has been diminished in too many lives, depriving them of opportunities. Instill in us a vision of wholeness for all that young and old and all in between might thrive. In this new year, help us implement learnings of the past, change our systems, and live into your dream of beloved community.

We lift into your loving care all who are struggling from the impact of the virus: those who have lost loved ones, those who are ill and continue to recover; those who have lost jobs, health care, food security, housing; small business owners. We pray for emotional and physical health of medical professionals upon whom we are so dependent to save lives. Grant guidance to civic leaders called upon to balance the welfare of all.

We pray for residents of the Fijian Islands recovering from devastating cyclone. Grant them resilience as they rebuild homes and communities.

We seek your direction for the life and ministry of this congregation. You have called us to be a beacon of saving grace. Guide us to be wise stewards of our gifts as we participate in Christ’s ministry of salvation.

We lift our prayer in name and way of Jesus, whom we follow. Amen.

ⁱ Mary Doria Russell, *A Thread of Grace: A Novel* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005), pp. 158-159.

ⁱⁱ Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), p. 83.