

“Providence”

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

“This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet.”

Today's Gospel message is about Providence. It is about believing in the faithful guidance and certain plan that God provides in each of our lives.

The last thing that my wife Carla and I thought we wanted to do was come back to Knoxville. Not that there is anything wrong with Knoxville of course. After all I was born and raised here, but it just did not seem like the best place for us at the time. About to graduate from Virginia Theological Seminary and soon to be ordained a transitional Deacon, the time had finally come to begin interviewing at the various churches that our Bishop had given us as options for placement. Having visited, explored, and interviewed all but one of these options and not having the slightest sense of a call to any of them, Carla and I decided at that point that we would do everything in our power to be released from the Diocese of East Tennessee in order that we might seek a calling elsewhere. Obviously, God had other plans.

As I sat in Bishop vonRosenberg's office and tried to explain to him that I did not feel a calling to any of the options he had given me, he, being not the slightest bit convinced, asked me whether or not I had visited Ascension yet. I told him that I had not, and that I really had not planned on doing so as I already knew that Ascension was not the place for us. It was too big, too close to home, I had too many connections there, not my style, etc., and a whole slew of other ready made excuses. So, of course, by the end of that day, I had already set up a meeting time with our very own Fr. Howard! As you can see, our Bishop is a pleasantly pastoral and slightly stubborn man. Just kidding. Don't repeat that!seriously. Now, Carla and I are not very spontaneous people. We are careful people. However, what amazes the both of us to this day is the fact that after having the opportunity to visit with Fr. Howard and to get a feel for Ascension, each of us had an almost immediate, intense, and undeniable feeling of being called to serve here at Ascension. Now,

in retrospect, serving in a community we love, and being part of a vibrant and faithful church family, we cannot deny when we look back, that it was all God's plan. Providence.

I share this story from my life with you all this morning because I believe that, at least in part, it relates to the message of this morning's Gospel. God provides faithful guidance and has a certain plan for each of our lives. Most often, we are not able to see this guidance or this plan in the present moment, as the events of our lives are unfolding, but when we look back, many times we are able to see clearly that God was indeed there the whole time. All went the way it was supposed to go, and somehow, God was behind it all. This was certainly the case with my call to come and serve you here at Ascension, and it has been the case in many other instances in my life as I hope it has been in yours as well. Providence.

That is what this morning's Gospel spoke to me as I prepared for today's sermon. Outside of its simply being a record of some of the early events in Jesus' life, the account from the Gospel according to Matthew this morning seemed to me to also be in some way a testament to, and an undeniable example of God's ultimate Providence in each of our lives. All throughout this lesson we see God's Providence. Whether it be through Joseph's dreams, or in the strong connections that this Gospel's author constantly makes between the events in Jesus' life and the Old Testament prophecies, the message that God has a clear plan for us and this world is unavoidable. "This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet." It is in these words and in the many like them which are spread all throughout the Gospel according to Matthew that we as Christians are able to witness a God who has created a special purpose for and reason behind the lives of all His children, of all of us.

You see, for the author of Matthew, almost everything about Jesus' life was done in order to fulfill what had already been prophesied about the coming Messiah. The author of Matthew intentionally points this out throughout this entire Gospel as a way of verifying or proving that indeed, Jesus of Nazareth was and is the Christ, the Messiah that had been prophesied in so many ways for so many years by his ancestors. For the author of Matthew and for the Jewish Christian community that was his audience, the authenticity of Jesus, and therefore their faith in Him, depended almost solely on whether or not the prophecies of old could be justifiably fulfilled through His life and actions. They had to be able to see that what took place with Jesus was indeed a part of God's plan. Interestingly though, in order for this verification to happen, believers had to be willing to take the prophecies of old and renew their understanding of what they meant in order to be able to

accept Jesus as the actual predicted Messiah. That is to say, many could not see how Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophecies until time had passed and they were able to look back. Like our own lives, many in Jesus' time were able to see God's guidance and certain plan only in retrospect.

So, just as with the life of Jesus as is seen in today's Gospel, and just like in the story I shared with you all today, I believe that God truly does provide guidance and indeed has some kind of plan or purpose for each and every one of our lives. However, again, just as in my story and just as it was with the early Jewish Christians, we often are not able to witness this guidance or this plan in the present. Rather, it is through examination of our personal past, and through examples such as those provided by today's Gospel lesson, that we Christians can live our daily lives with a solid belief and trust in God's ultimate providence, even when we are going through something that we may not presently understand. That is my message for us this morning. It is a call for us to believe in God's Providence, His guidance, His plan.

Perhaps right now, you are experiencing what seems like an absence of God's presence in your life, a so called dark night of the soul, or perhaps you are experiencing a type of suffering that you are sure God can be no part of, or perhaps you are feeling just plain lost. We all have such experiences in our Christian journeys, and for those of us living through these trials now I say to you, believe in God's Providence. Knowing that God has guided us through hard times in the past and holding on to that hope is the very thing that helps us get through our present challenges. It is for this reason that I lift up to all of us today this morning's Gospel as a witness to God's ultimate Providence, and it is for the same reason that I would like to encourage each of us this morning to begin to seriously review our own lives in search of such an experience. An experience that we have lived through that we didn't quite understand at the time, but one that now, in retrospect, clearly demonstrates God's guidance and plan. Let us hold on to those experiences and keep them close to our hearts so that they may be a shining reminder of God's ultimate Providence. A reminder that indeed none of us ever walk alone, but that God is always somehow there, in our midst, guiding us and helping us to fulfill our purpose, His plan for each of our lives.

“This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet.”

Amen.