



Flight Into Egypt: A Refugee's View
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe
Grace Lutheran Church, January 1, 2023
Matthew 2:13-23

Born in 1859, Henry Ossawa Tanner was one of the most celebrated artists of his generation. He grew up in Philadelphia as the son of Benjamin Tucker Tanner, a bishop in the African Methodist

Episcopal Church, and Sarah Tanner, who had escaped slavery via the Underground Railroad. At age 13 Henry decided to become a painter and went on to study under Thomas Eakins at Philadelphia's Academy of Fine Arts. On Christmas Day 1896, he resolved to serve God more faithfully, and from there on devoted himself to painting various scenes from the Bible, each communicating an intimate knowledge of the story through a deep and powerful spirituality. His son, in fact, referred to him as a mystic.

The Flight Into Egypt was one of his favorite subjects – he returned to it seven times.



From 1923, this is one of the later paintings and depicts the travelers having arrived in Egypt after their long journey, Mary and Joseph atop donkeys and led on foot by a ghostly guide. But just as on the night of Jesus' birth, they are shut out. We sense their exhaustion and alienation as they pass by locked doors. The town is walled up against them. Tanner was a refugee himself, who fled to Paris to escape the racial prejudice of America; in our time this resonates in our time with the plight of migrants who travel hundreds of miles only to find borders closed. Just like them, Mary and Joseph are seeking the most basic comforts that people can provide one another -- food, warmth, and shelter – but in this town find themselves locked out of human hearts.



In this version from 1910 I imagine them to be midway through the journey. Here we mainly sense the animals' exhaustion. They pass by developed areas, but no sustenance is forthcoming; the little troupe must make it on their own.



It is this earliest version from 1907 that I find most deeply affecting. I stumbled across it in the Cincinnati Museum of Art before I even knew who Henry Ossawa Tanner was, and I couldn't tear myself away. This is my own photo from that encounter so many years ago; I use it because no image I have found reproduces this remarkable shade of blue accurately, one that suffuses the entire scene and conveys the deep mystery of the journey.

I imagine that it is early in the journey. The landscape is barren but for a single looming tree. Mary and Joseph travel alone, without a guide. They have no idea of where they are going or what is in store. Their only guide is trust in God, who has spoken to Joseph in a dream.

We travel through deeper mists of uncertainty, lacking even a clear command from God. We pray, we watch, we listen, we strain to hear as we discern where God is calling us. And when we finally sense God's voice or some inkling of a direction, we follow even when it makes life difficult or inconvenient. I can identify; I sometimes ask, shouldn't I just be retired by now? Don't worry, that's not happening anytime soon.

For Mary and Joseph, it would have been easier to hide out where they were and hope that Herod's henchmen would not find them—although they would have, with Herod as raging mad as he was. Like Joseph, we must we trust in the signs that God sends us, whether they are big revelations in dreams or small, seemingly inconsequential things that we might have dismissed if we weren't on the alert.

Prayer—constant, never-ending conversation with God—helps us detect and treasure these. that when we discern God calling to us – almost always when we least expect it, in ways that are almost always surprising. For Joseph, the salvation of the world depended on his obedience. For us, in whatever our own circumstances may be, who is to say that the same may not be the case?

Amen.