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“Spidey Sense”

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Even though they were Galileans rather than Judeans, they were, by living in Bethlehem, subjects to Herod’s rule. They joined those Hebrews who sought to escape Herod’s brutal tyranny. Scholars estimate that thousands of Jews fled to colonies in Egyptian cities. Jesus and his parents become refugees. This fits, as the origin of the name, Hebrew, comes from the word, ‘Apiru,’ meaning refugee. From his birth, Jesus is accustomed to being a stranger in a strange land.

Which introduces us to one of the stories of the Christmas spider. Now that Advent has come, it’s permissible, according to Bob’s Rules, to talk about Christmas. We’ll soon unbox the decorations, garland the bannister, display the crèche, arrange the figurines (including Yukon Cornelius and the Bumble), and hang ornaments. Our spider ornament is among the last ones we place on our Christmas tree. I paraphrase the legend of the Christmas spider.

Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus sneak out of Bethlehem seeking refuge in Egypt. Meanwhile, Herod, desperate to destroy any threat to his throne, ordered his soldiers to murder all male children born in Bethlehem and region two years old or younger. Exhausted and cold, Jesus’ family finds a cave in which to hide for the night from Herod’s soldiers. Frost covers the ground. A chilly wind along with fear of detection prevents them from starting a fire. Mary tries to warm her baby, Joseph tries to warm them both. Baby Jesus cries, awakening a sleeping spider. The spider, hearing Joseph pray for God to protect his wife and baby, sympathizes with this desperate family and spins a blanketing web across the mouth of the cave. Soon the web is covered with hoarfrost.

A patrol of Herod’s soldiers suddenly appears, hunting for any family trying to escape Herod’s mad wrath. They spot the mouth of the cave, draw their swords, and prepare to enter. Their captain, however, scolds them, pointing out the frosted web stretched across the cave’s entrance. “Fools!” he barks, “nobody’s in there.” The spider kept Jesus’ family warm. The spider’s protected the life of baby Jesus

Remember this spider when you hang tinsel on your Christmas tree.

Maybe it’s not Jesus who’s the stranger in a strange land. Maybe it’s not Jesus for whom there is no room. Maybe it’s the Herods of the world who don’t belong, those who don’t do anything to make their people’s lives better, those who assume their will alone is the law. There is no room for them. We are tired of them. We are sick and tired of Herod and Herod’s henchmen. God bless spiders who thwart their cruel ambitions. We need more spiders: “For the great and powerful of this world, there are only two places in which their courage fails them, of which they are afraid deep down in their souls, from which they shy away. These are the manger and the cross of Jesus Christ [Dietrich Bonhoeffer]”

Some months later, news arrives in Egypt that Herod has died. The tyrant is dead. Is it safe to go home? They hope so. These refugees decide to return home in Bethlehem to start over.

Rome appoints a new ruler over that region. Herod's remaining three sons each are apportioned a region of Dad's kingdom to rule. Archelaus is given Jerusalem, Bethlehem, all the southern territory of Judea to rule. Archelaus proves worse than his father. Archelaus burnt alive rabbis and their students who protested him installing Roman idols in the Temple of Jerusalem. During one Passover a riot erupted in Jerusalem. His soldiers slaughtered 3,000. Another rebellion erupted and Archelaus ordered the crucifixion of 2,000 Hebrews. This the boy Jesus likely saw. He sees, he remembers.

Joseph and Mary decide they must leave Bethlehem again, this time traveling north towards other family members in the inconspicuous, insignificant village of Nazareth. That region is ruled by Herod's other son, Herod Antipas, who hasn't yet shown himself to be as cruel as his brother. To boy Jesus it's an adventure, to mom and dad it's life and death. The blessed child remains unworried. Children trust until they learn not to. His parents? Desperate, courageous, believing.

There in Nazareth they settle and build a new home, dedicated to making a home that is safe, loving, faithful. There in Nazareth the family grows, baby brothers and sisters are born, this family and their neighbors dealing with hard times as all families must. We all learn to carry on with broken hearts.

We need more spiders.