

Have you ever been reading a book or watching a movie and thought to yourself, "I've heard this story before?" It seems familiar because it's got all the same major plot points, even maybe the same characters, and it just seems to be something that's rehashed over and over again. I think you see this the most often with a Hollywood sequel. They had a successful movie and it made a lot of money, so they said, "Hey! Let's make another one!" But then you watch it, and it's the same plot. It's the same characters. It's very often even the same bad guy. And you think "How unoriginal. I wanted something new and I got the same thing all over again." Because when people repeat themselves in this way, Christians, we often think that it's unoriginal, just not being very creative. But God repeats himself too. Sometimes in the Bible he tells the same story, not because he's unoriginal or uncreative, but because he wants us to learn an important point. And so when we hear something over again, we should pay attention, because God is trying to teach us something.

We see that happening today in our Old Testament reading in Genesis chapter 46, which we might call "part one," and also in Matthew chapter 2, which we might call "part two." In part one, we meet Jacob who is anxious about the future. He's worried about what's gonna happen to him, because he's wondering, "Is this famine that I'm facing going to kill me and my family?" And in part two we meet Joseph who is also afraid for the future and wondering what's going to happen to him, because he's afraid of Herod and what he might do to his family. In part one, God speaks to Jacob directly. And in part two God speaks to Joseph through an angel. But he tells both of them the same message: "Go to Egypt. Take your family there and stay there until I tell you." Because in part one and in part two, God wants to teach us what it means to trust him, and we find a beautiful example of that in Jacob and in Joseph. And in part one and part two, God gives us a reason why we can trust him: because he is in control of all things. So pay attention, Christians! God does not repeat himself in vain. He wants us to listen and to learn from the example of Jacob and from Joseph.

So in the Old Testament reading--in part one, as it were--we meet Jacob. And Jacob is wondering, "What's going to happen to me?" Because at this point in the book of Genesis, they are two years into a seven-year famine. There's no food being grown, because they can't seem to make anything grow, and so he's worried about how he's gonna support his family. And you have to understand, this is not like he was trying to support like two or three people. There were 70 people in his family. That's a lot of mouths to feed! He's worried, "How am I going to be able to take care of all of them?" But at that time, he receives word from his son Joseph, who through a series of events has ended up in Egypt and has become Pharaoh's right hand man. And Joseph says to him, "Come down to Egypt! We'll settle you in the land of Goshen, and you'll have enough to eat. We're going to take care of you. All you have to do is come to us." But Jacob is still worried because Egypt is a strange land. This is a foreign country that he's being asked to go to. And on top of that, God made a promise to Jacob that he would inherit the land he was living in, that that land would belong to his offspring. And now he's being asked to leave it all behind. Does that mean that he's leaving God's promises behind? Does that mean that he's leaving God behind as he goes down into Egypt? These are questions that are weighing heavily on his mind.

And then in part two, we meet Joseph, the husband of Mary, who is also worried about what the future might bring. Because he has heard that Herod is seeking to kill baby Jesus. And whenever Herod threatens something, you better pay attention, because Herod is not a stable man. He is

cruel. He is a tyrant. He even killed members of his own family so that he could continue being king. When Herod threatens something, you better take it very seriously. And so Joseph was wondering, "What's going to happen? Is he going to kill this child? And if he kills this child, he's probably going to come after me too, because he wants to make sure that this will never happen again." And besides that, he's being asked to go to Egypt too, and that's a strange country for him as well. Yes, it's not a foreign country anymore by this point, because Egypt is part of the Roman Empire, just like Israel's part of the Roman Empire. But he's probably a man who never left his home in his life. He grew up in Nazareth. He probably lived most of his adult life in Nazareth. And now he's being asked not only to leave his home country and his hometown, but to go to a completely foreign place. That would make anybody anxious, wondering what is going to happen in the days ahead. So Joseph is anxious too, wondering what would come of all this.

Christians, are you anxious about your future? That's a very easy thing to do these days. I mean, after all, it seems like everything is being turned upside down. A country that seems to be falling apart. It's very easy to wonder what is going to happen to us. And more than that, it's the beginning of a new year. We're wondering, "What is 2021 going to hold for us as opposed to this past year? Am I going to get sick? Is my family going to get sick? Are we dealing with any of these things are going to happen? What does God have in store for me and for my family?" But it's very easy also to give in to a spirit of fear, to think that because these things are going downhill that they're just gonna keep going downhill, that things are never going to get better, that God is somewhere far off out there. He's not really concerned about me, because otherwise why would he let these things happen? Maybe God just can't do anything about it. Or maybe God doesn't want to do anything about it. It's very easy to give into that kind of thinking. But unfortunately when we do that, when we give into the spirit of fear, to a spirit of panic, we are forgetting that God is in fact in control of all things. Because when we give into that spirit of fear, we start to think that maybe God is somewhere far off, that he's not really concerned about what's happening to me.

But that's not a good spirit to be in, because God is in fact in control. God has all things in his mighty hands. And we see that in our Old Testament and our Gospel for today, what it means to have that spirit of trust in the face of an uncertain future. Because Jacob hears the words of God. God says to him, "I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down into Egypt." And Jacob trusts him. Jacob listens to what God has to say. And he goes down to Egypt without any fear whatsoever, because Jacob knows that just because he's in Egypt, that doesn't mean that God has left him. God is still God, and God will keep his Word even in this foreign land. And so Jacob does not fear, even though he has no idea what's going to happen, because he knows that God will take care of him.

And in part two, Joseph hears the words of the angel: "Take the child and his mother, and go down into Egypt until I tell you." And Joseph listens. Joseph trusts in the Word that he hears. He's so trusting, in fact, that he leaves that same night. To leave everything behind that he's ever known to go to that strange and foreign land, because he knows that God will protect him, and God will save him from the wrath of Herod. He's not afraid. He simply goes, because he has heard the promises of God. And he knows that God is in control.

So Christians, you don't have to be afraid either. Whatever this coming year might bring, whatever our future might hold, God is still God. And because he is still God, we know that he's going to take care of us. God is with us, and we know that because of his Son Jesus Christ, whom he has given to us as proof that he loves us and that he's going to take care of us. As Paul says in Romans chapter 8, nothing, absolutely nothing, not height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. God is with you, so there's no reason to be afraid.

But God also teaches us through all of this that he is in control of all things, and God has a purpose for everything that he does. We see that again in our readings. God brings Jacob down into Israel, first of all, because he made a promise to Abraham back in Genesis chapter 15, that his descendants would be strangers in a land that wasn't theirs and they would suffer for 400 years, but then he would bring them out again. And so God bringing Jacob down into Egypt is the beginning of that fulfillment. God was going to keep his Word that he had made to Abraham all those years ago. And more than that God was going to make Israel into a great nation. They would become great and numerous, as God had promised. And God would bring them out again by his own mighty hand. Not by their numbers, not by their strength, not by anything like that, but purely by God's own power. And in doing so, God would bring about the salvation of the whole world. God had a reason for doing what he did.

And with Joseph in part two, in Matthew chapter 2, God brings him down into Egypt in order to fulfill the words of the prophet Hosea, in Hosea chapter 11, where it says, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." Jesus is true Israel. He is Israel as they should have been. And so to be Israel, he goes down and does everything that Israel did. Israel went down to Egypt. Jesus goes down to Egypt. Israel came back again. Jesus comes back again. All of this is to prove that he is in fact the Savior of the world. So we see here the example of God's salvation at work. God does these things for a reason.

And Christians, God also does the things that he does in your lives for a reason too. God is in control. These things are not an accident. These things do not just happen willy-nilly. God is doing what he does for a reason. Now we aren't going to know what that reason is most of the time. And to be honest, God doesn't have to give us an answer to that question. God is still God. He has his reasons, and they're known only to him. But that doesn't mean that we will never understand. Very often we come to understand much later in our lives when we have gone through all of these things and can look back and say, "This is how God was working at that time. Even in the difficult times, God was with me, and I can see it now." And in that day we will be able to glorify God and to give thanks to him for all that he has done. That may happen at the end of the age too, when God reveals many things to us. And we will be able to glorify him for his mercy. Because even in those difficult times, Christians, God has a reason for doing what he does. And he will take care of you no matter what.

So trust in him. God is still God. God is the King of all things. And this new year or whatever it might be is not going to change that. God will be with you always. And even if you don't understand why he lets things happen, God will still lead you, and he will take care of you no matter what. Jesus lives, so trust him, because he is your Savior.

To him be the glory, now and forever. Amen.