

Matthew 2:13-23

¹³Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

¹⁶When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ “A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

¹⁹When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰“Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.” ²¹Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

Refugees on the Run. January 1, 2017

“Into the wild and painful cold of the starless winter night came the refugees, slowly making their way to the border. The man, stooped from age or anxiety, hurried his small family through the wind. Bearded and dark, his skin rough and cracked from the cold, his frame looming large in spite of the slumped shoulders: He looked like a man who could take care of whatever came at them from the dark. Unless, of course, there were too many of them. one man he could handle...two, even..., but a border patrol...they wouldn't have a chance.

His eyes, black and alert, darted from side to side, then over his shoulder, then back again forward. Had they been seen? Had they been heard? Every rustle of wind, every sigh from the child, sent terror through his chest. Was this the way?

Even the stars had been unkind—had hidden themselves in the ink of night so that the man could not read their way. Only wind...was it enough? Only the wind and his innate sense of direction...

What kind of cruel judgement would that be, to wander in circles through the night? Or to safely make their way to the border only to find the authorities waiting for them? He glanced at the young woman, his bride. No more than a child herself, she nuzzled their newborn, kissing his neck. She looked up, caught his eye, and smiled. Oh, how the homelessness had taken its toll on her! Her eyes were red, her young face lined, her lovely hair matted from inattention, her clothes stained from milk and baby, her hands chapped from the raw wind of winter.

She'd hardly had time to recover from childbirth when the word had come that they were hunted, and they fled with only a little bread, the remaining wine, and a very small portion of cheese. Suddenly, the child began to make small noises. The man drew his breath in sharply; the woman quietly put the child to breast.

Fear...long dread-filled moments...

Huddled, the family stood still in the long silence. At last the man breathed deeply again, reassured they had not been heard. And into the night continued Mary and Joseph and the Babe.”*

This is another beautiful reading by Poet Ann Weems who I’ve been deeply moved by this Christmas, and I hope her words speak to you as well. I’ll be coming back to her a little later in the service.

Our reading from Matthew this morning is certainly challenging, and in some ways horrific. Particularly as heard in the context of Christmas and all the wonderful things we’ve been hearing about the Light of the World and the coming of this Christ Child. We’ve heard Angels sing in the heavens, and shepherds and wise men who came and praised the tiny child and sat in rapt wonder as they considered ‘God With Us, Emmanuel’. We’ve enjoyed all kinds of happy and comforting feelings as we too gaze upon this wondrous scene and our hearts swell a little in the glow of it all. And then suddenly the small babe is bundled up and secreted off in the night to Egypt by his family for fear that he will be killed by some maniacal ruler named Herod. That before we get too used to this momentous, joyful, wondrous, Christmas moment, we are plunged into the horrors of real life; living in the fear of those who would destroy the lives of our children, our family, our ways of being in the world. Happy New Year Jesus!

I can’t help but draw a comparison to our own political, social, and religious culture. We’ve just had our Christmas ‘high’ and we’re riding on that sugar infused-tinsel covered-moment and then we turn on the news or pick up the paper only to see that there are still Herods in our lives. Herods who are, insecure, power grabbing, paranoid, immoral, and in charge. And some of us would probably welcome an angel who would tell us to flee to another land until it is safe. But the truth of this story is that no one is really safe, not even Jesus. That sometimes God seems far away and we don’t know if we will be alright.

This is what our living tells us and you know it as well as I do. But I couldn’t help but think that this story also reminds us that not only is ‘God with us’, but God was with Jesus and his family as well, leading them into the promise of a new life even though the road was dark and dangerous. This is the great story of our faith retold by Matthew. It is the story that reminds us of that other fellow named Joseph, and how God used him to make a way for His people. A way that was fraught with challenges and danger, wandering and wavering, faith and doubt. A story of God’s faithfulness as the people were led forth into the promised land. A people who have always been the children of a wandering Aramean; a stranger in a strange land, a refugee. And I believe that he calls us to journey with them and to remember all those who find themselves on similar journeys fearful of those pursuing them.

Our world right now is full of refugees who are seeking lives that are safe from the Herods of the world and the powers that perpetuate their reigns. And one of the themes of our Christmas Eve service was the need for creating mangers and safe places in the world for those who are just like Jesus and his family. That we are all meant to build mangers and then open them to others. That if you can’t find one... build one, and if you’re not invited...well invite others.

One of my devotions this week suggested that rather than put our manger scenes back in the box for another year we should move the Holy family to another location in the church or our homes. “Perhaps to a window looking out on the larger world, the world where there is still violence and repression and terror, and where there are refugees fleeing, needing protection, human beings in whom the Christ is crying for us to protect.”

There have been many churches who have opened their doors as true sanctuaries for those seeking this manger both here and around the world. It’s a bold move and one that comes at a price. But we are the church of the most important refugee of all time, and I’d like to think that this is what he would want us to do for those in need. I don’t know exactly how this happens, but don’t think for a moment that you can shut the door on this

issue and not also be shutting the door on Jesus as well. And so, I am continually asking myself, “What can you do, not only for those in some foreign country far, far, away, but what can you do right here in your own back yard? We have refugees all around us if we are honest and are willing to look, and not just people, animals too.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette wrote the following hymn two days before Christmas; the hymn begins with a traditional image of a manger scene, and becomes a prayer that we may look deeper— at our loving God who chose to come into this world as someone who was poor, powerless, in danger, and a refugee. It is a prayer for the church to work for justice as our gift to Jesus and it goes like this.

A New Father, Awe-Struck

MUELLER 11.11.11.11 ("Away in a Manger")

A new father, awe-struck; a mother so mild;
A stable; a manger; a dear, newborn child—
God, as we imagine that family so blessed,
We sometimes forget they were poor and oppressed.

A woman—considered to have no real worth—
Said, yes! She would bear your own Son here on earth.
We hear her bold singing! Her faithful words soar:
“God humbles the rich and God lifts up the poor.”

As Joseph and Mary began a new home,
They suffered oppression from rulers in Rome.
Then, fleeing from Herod to save their son’s life,
They looked for a land free from violence and strife.

We hear in our own day the cries of the poor;
We see in Aleppo the terror of war.
In women and children and men who must flee,
We glimpse, Lord, your life as a young refugee.

When some say that only the wealthy have worth,
O God, we recall where you lived here on earth.
May we in your church serve the poor and distressed;
For, working for justice, we give you our best.

And now I invite you sing with me the first and last verses of this familiar hymn which I’m sure you know by heart. And I do so to remind you that not only are we called to care for others, but that this Lord cares for us as well. Please sing with me.

Away in a manger, no crib for His bed,
The little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.
The stars in the sky looked down where he lay
The little Lord Jesus, asleep in the hay

Be near me Lord Jesus; I ask thee to stay
Close by me forever and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care,
And fit us for heaven to live with thee there. Tune: James Ramsey Murray, 1887.
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I'm going to leave you with another reading from Ann Weems which brings me great hope as I travel this road to Egypt and beyond with Jesus and his family and all those who are refugees including some of us. It is called, "***Peace On Earth***"*

"Peace on earth, goodwill to all"...

The song came out like one loud hosanna hurled through the earth's darkness, lighting the Bethlehem sky.

Sometimes I hear it now, but it means a baby in a manger; it means a time of year, a cozy feeling, a few coins in the Salvation Army bucket. It doesn't mean much—and then it's gone, lost in the tinsel.

Where did the angels' song go? Who hushed the alleluias? Was it death and war and disease and poverty? Was it darkness and chaos and famine and plague? Who brought violence and took away the sweet plucking of heavenly harps? Who brought despair and took away hope? Who brought barrenness and crushed the flowers? Who stole the music and brought the silence? What Herods lurk within our world seeking to kill our children?

Are there still those who long to hear an angel's song and touch a star? To kneel beside some other shepherd in the hope of catching a glimpse of eternity in a baby's smile? Are there still those who sing "Peace on earth, goodwill to all"? If there are—then, O Lord, keep ablaze their flickering candle in the darkness of this world!"

**Kneeling in Bethlehem* by Ann Weems. Published by Westminster Press

Let us pray. O God of Love and Light, let us be your flickering candles in a dark and troubled world. Let our love for you and each other become beacons for all the world to see and let us not be afraid to stand before the Herods of the world with only the strength of your love and grace.

Be with all those who are fleeing for safety today. Those who are refugees hoping to find a new beginning in a new land or those hoping to be restored to their homes. Guide them with your love and let us be havens and mangers along the way providing food and shelter, hope and light, encouragement and resources. Let us never forget that we too were, and sometimes still are, strangers in a strange land, just as our ancestors were.

We remember this day those dear to us who are struggling with the realities of living in this day and time. Those who are lonely and depressed, those who are wandering and wondering about the meaning of life, those who are seeking jobs and ways to make a living, those who are truly hungry and cold, those who need homes and places to live that offer fair and affordable rent. For those who are ill or waiting for treatment, those who are dependent upon others, those who serve and care for the community, especially those in law enforcement and our firefighters, for those who provide emergency transport, and those who are doctors and nurses. O God of all refugees we offer now our prayers both spoken and silent for those close to our hearts.

God of new beginnings, we thank you for this day and all the days of our lives and we offer these prayers in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray saying, Our Father...