

Matthew 2:13-17
Moving Us
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1-5-20

Well Happy New Year everyone! I hope you all had a very festive time ringing in this new year. I wonder if the 20s will be roaring like the last 20s? If our family's New Years Eve is any indication, however, I'm not so sure. The kids and I watched a movie and tucked in and all sound asleep by 9:30. A bunch of party animals we no doubt are.

I am however very grateful for the chance to spend the last week or so at home with family in Minnesota. It was a week of sledding, skating, skiing, and lots of time with friends and family enjoying good food, company, and a marvelous Golden Gopher win in the Outback Bowl over Auburn. All in all, it was a great time away, I thank you for the chance to rest and recharge.

I'm also grateful to Mark and David Perry for their leadership last week in my absence. We are so blessed in so many ways to have such breadth and depth of gifts and spirit filling our congregation. It's so encouraging to see the ways in which God is equipping and preparing us for more meaningful ministry reach here in our community. I hope that you are as encouraged as I am that the vision for is 2020.

So as we begin this new year, I can't help but think about where we've been in the last year. For some, this may have felt like most any other year. For others this may have been a banner year. Still for others 2019 felt like a year in which we were propelled out into an unimaginable landscape, with little more than faith and one another to sustain our journey. Maybe there were even a few of you, who, like me, felt a little like a refugee from the normal.

Well, we can take comfort in knowing that Jesus and the full story of Christmas offers us comfort and hope even in the midst of our turbulence.

In Matthew 2, no sooner than the wrapping paper was picked up off the floor of the manger, that Joseph received word from an angel that danger was closing in on them. Get up, move quickly, bring only what you can carry, the gifts will serve as currency for your travels, go to Egypt, says the angel in a dream. A ruthless, power-crazed dictator heard that a new king had been born, a baby, and this was a threat to his rule.

In the vastness of Herod's power and authority in this area, it was teenage parents and their newborn that caused him to fear for the fate of his power and control. And yet, isn't that always the way it is when justice and righteousness confronts evil and tyranny?

The story of Christmas continues to be one of trust and faith in the midst of vast uncertainty. With their newborn child still swaddled in the clothes of his birth, Mary and Joseph and Baby Jesus become a refugee family as they flee live in Egypt--probably for several years.

Of course this part of the Gospel narrative, depicting this family fleeing one nation to find safety in another, foreign nation is one that is deeply relevant to today. With the news of so many families fleeing their homes in Iraq, Syria, Guatemala, Bhurma this story draws our attention to the fact that

God's people had once again found safety and protection in a foreign land. In the same way that the family of Jacob, and all his twelve sons found their way to Egypt in the Book of Genesis, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph too risked it all to keep their family together.

Whether it was opening space in the manger because there was no room in the inn, or finding refuge in a foreign land because there was danger closing in on them at home, the Gospel invites us to consider how we open our hearts and our lives to those in search of shelter.

I am so proud of the fact that this congregation has a history of protecting the vulnerable and refugee. Back in the early 80s when mission and ministry partner Sam Thammavongsa was just a young boy, his family was relocated here in Wabash, and this congregation—with the leadership of Phil and Evelyn Magner—brought the Thammavongsa family under your wing.

I am excited to be a part of a group, along with Kristy Church and a number of other community leaders, here in Wabash who are looking at how we as a community can become more and more open and hospitable to people from other nations and cultures—and this includes refugees. Studies indicate that the way to a growing and thriving population is by increasing and broadening its cultural diversity. And, the more communities remain fixed and homogenous, the more rapid their decline.

We know something about this, not just because we have the experience in providing refuge and hospitality to a family in the past, but because the Christ child and his family comes to us all inquiring: “is there room, is there safety, is there a place for me here?” And he comes not just in the remembering of this story, but he comes to us in the person standing before us, searching for a place.

The writer of Hebrews encourages us this way, saying: **Let your mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.**

Experience of finding friendship and safety in new places...

But the story doesn't end there. If only we could wipe the anxious sweat from our brow knowing that they had reached safety. The story continues, though Jesus' family escaped the terror of Herod, other families did not.

Next we hear the unthinkable, a “furious” Herod, who perceived Jesus as a rival to his grip on power, orders the killing of all the boys 2 years and under in Bethlehem. These children have come to be remembered as the “holy innocents.” These first martyrs are remembered in the church's calendar during Christmas in the Feast of the Innocents.

In a poignant New York times Op-Ed piece last week, the Wheaton College Professor and Anglican Priest Esau McCaulley asks: “Why is it important that the church continue to tell this story during the Christmas season? And why in the world would we—or those who recognize and celebrate the feasts of the Church calendar—want to remember one about the death of innocent children?”

I think for two reasons: 1. Because reminds us of the things God cares most about. The things God cares most about don't happen in Washington or on Wall Street, or in the seats of power. The truly vital events are happening in refugee camps, detention centers, slums and prisons, homes and hospital rooms where people open their hearts and lives to one another and those in need. The Church finds her voice not when we are close to the powerful, but when we remember, as Luke puts it, that God "has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble."

The second reason we read this story is to remind ourselves of the good news that emerges from the horrible news, that out of the darkness new light dawns. Even Herod's evil plan didn't undo God's redemptive plans. God is still marching toward the day when he will make all things new. And if it feels like you've been run over by a truck this year, if it feels like the world is continuing to close in on you, know that you are not alone. The powerful punch of Christmas is that though the evil and darkness of Herod still looms, seeking to undo God's work in your life, the truth is that God's plan continues to march on.

In 2016 a film called *The Innocents* was released. It tells the true story of the last days of WWII, when a Physician in training, Madeleine Pauliac working for the Red Cross is sent to care for wounded French Soldiers. While there she quietly receives a request to come provide an emergency cesarean section in, of all places, a Benedictine Convent for a nun. But when she arrives at the Convent she learns that it not just one nun is pregnant and expecting any moment, but dozens.

You see nine months prior this cloister of women who had taken vows of meekness, poverty, and singular devotion to Christ was invaded by a Russian Platoon who had repeatedly assaulted its inhabitants young and old alike.

And now as the Red Cross was about to move on from this dangerous and unstable region, word finally gets out that a convent is about to turn into a nursery. So, this Doctor, who herself is a part of a strict society, working for the Red Cross, must navigate her way between the convent and Red Cross in the midst of late war Poland to help usher in this new and unlikely community.

The climax comes as the Red Cross is about to move on, we get as hopeful and fetching an image of the Kingdom of God that is yearned for by Isaiah and Jesus alike as is possible. Not only does this convent become a nursery for dozens of infants, but remarkably it becomes an orphanage not only for the infants but for a large number of the area's homeless orphans. Suddenly, by grace, all the exiled babies, nuns, and orphans, have a home and a family and a new kind of reality.

Genesis 50:20 reads, what you (evil, Satan, the enemy) intended for harm, God can turn around and use for good.

Why should we read about a family on the run from the government at Christmas? Why should we read of the unthinkable evil committed by a power-hungry despot at Christmas? So much of it makes so little sense, and yet into this world Christmas comes. Why are families sent fleeing from their homes by their own nations? Why are men and women and children separated from one another at our boarder? Why do the people we love have heart conditions that cause the loss of a leg? Why did cancer leave me to raise our three children without the love of my life? I don't know.

But I do know that when everything seems at its worst and most hopeless Christmas comes. Jesus and his family take on the life of a refugee so that all of us wanderers will know that we are not

alone. Jesus will walk among the poor, the infirmed, the blind so that they will know that they are not alone. Jesus will sit with a mother and sisters who have lost those dearest to them to know that they are not alone. Jesus will raise dead people, even he himself will die so that those who have lost everything can know that in the midst of their darkest moments the morningstar will rise.

Christians believe that suffering does not happen in vain. The cries of the oppressed do not go forever unanswered. We believe that the children slaughtered by Herod were ushered into the presence of God and will be with him for eternity. And that the families forced to brave this world as refugees are in good company with the Family of God.

It is a brutal world that God came to save. It's a world a holy God would have had every right to turn his back on—as he nearly did once in a time of a great flood—but God stuck with the world anyway. He made a promise to save. The Good News that emerges from the Horrible News is that even Herod's evil did not undo God's plan or wipe out God's Christ. God is still marching on toward that day when a child will lead them and when God will declare "Behold, I make all things new."

This is the hope we cling to at Christmas, that even in the darkest night, a flicker of light will come.

There is a postscript of the movie, one of the nuns arranges for a photo to be taken of their new reality, a convent full of nuns raising their newborn children. They send it to their physician rescuer. There, in the worst of circumstances and against all odds, the Kingdom of God appears. Out of the darkness came "love's pure light," at Christmas.