

Sunday, January 5, 2020
Second Sunday after Christmas (Year A)
Matthew 2.13-15, 19-23
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Christmas Refugees”

During the Christmas season, we have so many sweet and tender images to hold on to. An angel proclaiming “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Lk 2.10-11). Followed by the appearance of “a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” (Lk 2.13-14). Shepherds watching their flocks in the field, receiving this glorious news from the heavenly messenger, prompting them to go “to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to” them. And, the baby Jesus, the Son of God, God in the flesh, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, under the adoring eyes of Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, and, of course, numerous cuddly animals. This is the imagery that the Gospel According to Luke leaves us with this time of year.

To that, the Gospel According to Matthew adds the imagery of magi from the East who follow a star, which comes to rest over the manger in Bethlehem. These foreign travelers have discerned that this star can only mean the birth of a king, the King of the Jews. And to this new king they bring precious gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. While that part of the story is but one of the options for the Second Sunday after Christmas, we did not actually hear it this year. But we know that part of the story anyway, from the Christmas pageant, Christmas carols, and memories of Christmases past. Instead, I opted for what comes after Christmas. What comes after the angels and shepherds have departed. What comes after the magi leave to go home. What happens when everyone goes back to their normal, everyday lives.

For then, immediately after the magi leave to go home, everything changes. Everything falls apart. A fairytale story that should end with “and they lived happily ever after” quickly turns into a melodrama. Worse yet, a living nightmare.

Instead of Mary and Joseph being able to settle into their life as newlyweds, as parents of a newborn infant, they are forced to flee for safety. Not for their safety, but for the safety of their child. Herod was enraged that there might be a new king of the Jews—someone who would replace him as king—so he ordered the death of “all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under” (Mt 2.16). What we now refer to as the Slaughter of the Holy Innocents. No, instead of the nice, joyful life they had envisioned for themselves, Mary and Joseph, along with the baby Jesus, are forced to become refugees.

While we know that it happened, we don’t generally hear this part of the story. Perhaps because it throws a wet blanket on the whole Christmas season. But this story serves an important purpose in Matthew’s telling the story of who Jesus is. Matthew presents his gospel in such a way as to build the case for his Jewish audience that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. He specifically uses parallels between Jesus and Moses, attempting to make the case that Jesus is

the “new Moses” – the one who would lead his people to a new life, a new promised land. The part of Matthew’s story that we hear today is a critical part in making this case.

As we heard, after the departure of the magi, Joseph was visited by an angel of the Lord in a dream, who warned him to take his family and flee to Egypt, as the child was in danger from Herod. As you recall, Egypt holds an important place in the history of the Hebrew people. Genesis tells us how Jacob moved his family to Egypt to escape drought and famine that devastated Canaan (Gen 37-50). Egypt thus provided a place of refuge for the people of Israel while they waited for the danger of drought and famine to pass. Just as Egypt would provide a place of refuge for the Holy Family while they wait for the danger that is King Herod to pass. The threat of Herod and his Slaughter of the Innocents itself has parallels with Moses, as well. Moses’ own life was endangered when the Pharaoh ordered all the male children of the Hebrews to be killed (Ex 1.22).

We know from the Old Testament that everything eventually got even worse for the Hebrews in Egypt. They were greatly oppressed by the Egyptians, until Moses came along and liberated his people, leading them out of Egypt to the Promised Land. While Jesus and the Holy Family were not oppressed by the Egyptians, they did eventually leave Egypt and return to their homeland. When Herod died and the coast was clear, Joseph again had a dream in which an angel of the Lord told him that it was safe to bring his family out of Egypt and return to Israel. Matthew specifically points out that the flight to Egypt and the subsequent return was another fulfillment of prophecy made by Hosea (11.1): “Out of Egypt I have called my son” (Mt 2.15). The prophecy from Hosea speaks of Israel’s exodus from Egypt, with “my son” being a reference to the nation of Israel. So now, in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is identified as “my son” who will save God’s people from their sins (Mt 1.21). The one who will lead the people to new life—eternal life.

As the Holy Family prepared to return home, there was still concern about safety. With Herod’s son Archelaus now in control of Judea, Joseph opted not to return to Bethlehem, but instead to go to an obscure village in Galilee called Nazareth. Again, Matthew says this was in fulfillment of the prophets: “He will be called a Nazorean” (Mt 2.23). It is unclear as to what prophecy this may be referring, as there is no direct Old Testament scriptural reference. It may well be that Matthew was calling attention to the vocation of a *nazir*—one whose life was devoted to God—to further underscore Jesus’ role as Messiah.

So, through today’s Gospel reading, Matthew links the birth of Jesus to the history of Israel and sets the stage for the events to come—for the complete fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy regarding the coming of the Messiah.

While the Gospel According to Matthew and the events we hear today were written to an audience comprised of potential Jewish converts to Christianity, it has no less meaning to those of us who, today, already follow Christ. Sure, we don’t need convincing, we don’t need proof, but we do need something that is buried deeper in the story of Jesus’ early days on the run from Herod. You see, this story carries a more personal message for us. Acknowledgement of who we are as human beings. But even more so, acknowledgement of who we are as members of the Body of Christ. That just as our Lord began his life as a refugee, we too, are refugees. Of

course, we are not refugees forced to flee for our physical safety, as was Jesus. Although that may be the reality for some.

What I am talking about is more of a metaphorical form of being a refugee. That we are religious refugees, as it were. Refugees from the ways of the secular world. Refugees based on our religious convictions. Not in the sense that that we are forced to flee for our safety because of our religious convictions, as some of our ancestors may have done. But in the sense that our religious convictions, the moral and ethical standards arising out of those convictions, are, at times, at odds with what we see in secular society. What has become the accepted norms of behavior outside of the bounds of our faith.

Being a refugee inherently means that we are fleeing something that is oppressive, unsafe, unhealthy. Fleeing the established norm, the status quo, in search of something better. A place where we can be secure in who we are and freely live our values. As we see around the world even today, this is often a fleeing to another place, another country. For us, we cannot physically flee to another place. We are firmly rooted in the culture and society around us. We are firmly rooted in this physical space. So, what then, are we fleeing, metaphorically speaking?

We are fleeing all those things that run counter to what Jesus preached and what he demonstrated through his life and ministry. What Jesus demonstrated through his death and resurrection. Injustice, inequality, marginalization, discrimination, racism, sexism, ageism, hatred, violence, oppression, destruction, self-centeredness, egotism, self-interests, manipulation, misleading interpretations of truth (fake news), whatever polarizes us, sinfulness, death. Need I go on?

In his life and ministry, Jesus was very clear about where we stand on such matters, such issues. Love God and love others. No exceptions. No ifs, ands, or buts. Jesus spent his early years as a refugee from these things. He spent his ministry condemning these things. He spent his ministry showing us that there is a way to live counter to, in opposition to, these things. He went to his death in defiance of these things. He was resurrected to put an ultimate end to these things.

Of course, these things still prevail “out there” in the secular world. And sometimes it feels as if instead of things getting better, they are getting worse. The reality is that while we wait for the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God, those things that are counter to what Christ lived and preached and died for will continue to rear their ugly heads. And those of us who follow Christ will continue to be refugees because of those things. Refugees seeking our “true home” in Christ’s Kingdom. But in the meantime, we follow the journey Jesus made in his early life. We continue to seek refuge that is found only in him. In the shelter and safety that he provides as our Lord and Master, as our Savior and Redeemer. Until, one day, we will be able to return to a kingdom not ruled by the likes of Herod—by sin and death—but to the Kingdom of God that is even now being prepared for us. Prepared by the One whose birth we celebrate this season. Prepared by the One who was himself a refugee, just as we are.