

First Sunday of Christmas January 1, 2022

Matthew 2:13-23

The season of Christmas in the year of Matthew is a bit like Holy Week. If you come to each of the services, it carries you through a story that will move you. The wonderful glow of Christmas Eve- soft, comforting, familiar. The rejoicing of Christmas Day, trumpets blaring and angels singing. And then, this text on the first Sunday of Christmas. A reminder of the historical reality of Jesus and his life.

Speaking of historical reality, some wonder, did the slaughter of the innocents really happen?

Well, there are no other records of such a massacre in the New Testament or elsewhere. While Josephus, a Roman-Jewish historian of that time, tells us that Herod ordered the execution of three of his sons; he says nothing about the Bethlehem massacre. However, the historical record shows that Herod was the kind of man who would do such a thing. Given the population of Bethlehem at the time, about 20 boys age two and under would have been killed. While horrific, certainly for those families and that community, one must ask if history would have recorded or remembered such a small number.

After all, UNICEF in August reported that 972 children in Ukraine had been killed or injured by that violence since the war began. That's an average of over five children killed or injured each day. Most sources agree that this is a low number. In the 7-year war in Yemen at least 3,774 children have been killed by that combat. More than 1 child per day.

In the United States, at the writing of this sermon, there have been 307 children aged 0-11 killed by gun violence (homicides, accidents, suicides). In May of 2022, a gunman killed 19 children at a school in Uvalde, TX. Ten years ago, at Sandy Hook Elementary school, a gunman killed 20 first graders.

How much are we aware of these figures? How much do they shape our lives? Do we even remember them after 10 years, much less decades? Or do they just fade into the background of this too violent world?

It shouldn't be surprising then that the deliberate slaughter of 20 boys by a violent and capricious king in a small suburb of a backwater country wouldn't rate historical remembering in that time much less ours.

So, this is likely reality for Jesus and his family, that to stay there would mean certain death for him. If this was your child. Your son. What would you do to save him? Would you leave everything behind, all that was familiar- culture, language, family, and move out of the reach of those trying to kill them?

There are others who face this very question right now in our world.

Another UNICEF report in June of 2022 said that conflict, violence, and other crises left a record 36.5 million children displaced from their homes at the end of 2021, the highest number recorded since the Second World War. This figure included 13.7 million refugee and asylum-seeking children and the rest who were internally displaced due to conflict and violence. This was before the invasion of Ukraine.

Closer to home we have seen a dramatic increase in immigrants arriving at our southern border, including children both accompanied and unaccompanied. Why do they come?

Poverty is one reason. In Honduras, half of the population lives below the poverty line. In many places in Central America, especially rural areas, there is a lack of jobs, poor access to education, health and nutrition, and very little sustained investment by the state in infrastructure or services. All this has been exacerbated by the pandemic. This abject poverty and no hope of alleviation drives many to leave.

But for others, the choice is not unlike that before Mary and Joseph. The significant social violence that characterizes daily life in many Central American countries is also a major driver of migration. Violent gangs target poor, vulnerable community members, and seek to recruit, extort, or otherwise intimidate youth and their families. It is also a harsh reality that women and young girls in Central America are especially vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation; these countries have some of the highest femicide rates in the world.

So, many come to our borders seeking safety because to remain in their homeland means the very real possibility of death for them and their children. A circumstance not unlike that of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus.

But can we really compare the holy family to those fleeing the fighting in Ukraine by going to Poland, to those fleeing to Europe from Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, to the United States from Central America?

As with most things, the answer is both yes and no.

Those on the no side of the argument say that Jesus and his family never left the Roman Empire, they fled from one region of Roman territory to another Roman territory which they compare to moving from one state to another state in the Union. That it was legal, funded by the gifts of the Magi, and temporary.

On the other hand, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees defines a refugee as “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.”

The argument for Mary and Joseph’s refugee status here is about as strong as it could be under the circumstances. It’s true that Egypt had recently come under Roman rule, so while Mary and Joseph were fleeing Herod’s jurisdiction they were still in the same Roman empire, but since most of the known world was part of the Roman empire, as one historian put it, that’s a distinction without much of a difference.

At the very least, one can state with confidence that Mary and Joseph were displaced by a violent government that would kill their son and sought refuge in a foreign land.

However, the question of whether that would qualify them as refugees in today’s terms is a moot point when it comes to how we treat those who come to our borders. The borders of our nation, our community, and our lives.

Why?

Because Jesus has already told us that he is present in those hungry, fearful, hopeful people who come to our borders. He does this in Matthew 25 when he says that when we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, we do so to him. Because there is not one human being we will look in the eyes who does not bear the image of the God who is Father to Jesus. Whose life is sacred for that reason if no other.

Yes, there are laws which govern who can enter our country for how long and for what reasons. And we are a nation of laws. However, the last major revision of those laws was in 1986- 36 years ago. Much has changed in both the United States and the world, and it would be wise to think that it might be time to revisit those rules in the face of those changes. What in your lives do you still do the same as you did in 1986?

Regardless, within the system we have, we treat each of those who cross our borders as if they were the holy family. With respect, dignity, compassion, striving to do right by them regardless of whether the law says they can stay or whether they must go.

The other reason for this, is the strong and consistent admonition in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, to care for the ger. This is Hebrew for stranger, temporary resident, or alien.

The Hebrew Bible assumes that most strangers require the support of the community and regularly reminds Israel that God loves the stranger, and Israel should love them and have compassion on them since the Israelites were strangers themselves in Egypt:

The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers (gerim) in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God. (Leviticus 19:33–34)

For the Lord your God ... befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers (gerim) in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:17–19)

Our text today reminds us that this faith is not just about me and my relationship with God. It is about the real consequences of not only our individual actions, but the ones

we take as a community- both as the church and as the state. Actions that can, in very real ways, decide whether some live and some die.

It is this world, with all its harsh realities and difficult and complex choices, that Jesus- Emmanuel, God with us- has entered into to transform. To show us a different way of being with one another. One rooted in love- of stranger, enemy, of friend and neighbor. One rooted in that love lived out in the sharing of food, water, shelter, community. In the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount that this grown-up child will preach in just a few short chapters. Give to everyone who begs from you, do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

It is this Jesus, who comes to make all things new. Us, our society, our world.

It is New Year's Day. A moment in our culture where we have a chance to start anew. To change. To be transformed. We make resolutions- that this year I will get more in shape, eat better, learn a new skill, take that trip, get more involved.

Perhaps, we might resolve, with the help and guidance of God through the Holy Spirit, that we- as individuals and as a community- will strive for justice in this world and in the way in which we treat those who are strangers in our land. That we might give a portion of our time and attention to those who flee violence and death for the hope of a peaceful life.

Perhaps, we might resolve to do so for the sake of the child born to us on Christmas Eve, the visible sign of God's love for this broken world. Jesus, Emmanuel- God with us.