

Sermon: First Sunday of Christmas (A) 12/28/25

Peace, Danville Pr. Lucy Kolin, preacher

Text: Matthew 2:13-23

After the amazing and happy Gospel stories we heard on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, **today's** gospel story comes as quite a shock. Yes, it opens with baby Jesus still in Bethlehem watched over by his mother and father. The shepherds are long gone...actually, they don't even make an appearance in Matthew's gospel. And the wise men from the east are **also** long gone, having left for home by another way to escape Herod and avoid letting him know exactly where they'd seen the infant born to be king.

But Herod is still **all over** this story, even without appearing in Bethlehem. His fear and anger at the thought that a child he'd never met would one day oust him from the throne was matched by his determination to eliminate the child. And because he had no idea where exactly to find the child or what he looked like, Herod decided to send in his army to slaughter all the babies that seemed the right age to be this newborn king. The one sent to be the Prince of Peace was declared a usurper, an infant traitor, determined to destroy Herod...but not if Herod got to him first. The egomania and outsize fear of Herod drive him to murder...and so it has been in every age, even our own.

The **first** part of today's story is thick with foreboding and also with the cries of mothers as their little ones are ripped from their breasts and slaughtered. To Herod violence was the way to ensure peace for himself...if not for those he ruled.

But that wasn't the **whole** story. God who had spoken to Joseph through a dream **before** sends **another** dream and another, more **urgent** message: "Take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt and stay there until I tell you it's safe to go home." It's a testament to Joseph that, even though the previous two dreams he'd received from

God had disrupted his life and his careful plans, he trusted God and did what God commanded not just, I think, because God said, "Do this," but because he loved the child Jesus and he loved Mary, his wife, and was determined to keep them safe...no matter the cost.

Yet, **despite** God's promise to be with them, God's command was going to require Joseph to be very brave and careful and quick, if he was going to keep his family safe. They were **already** a long way from home...now they were being told to go **even further**, to a place Joseph had never been...or imagined he would go. Oh, Joseph, good Jew that he was, knew about Egypt, the good and the bad of it, how it had provided a path for his namesake Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers, to rise to power and become a kind of savior to his family and many others when famine struck...but **also** how, under the Pharaohs Egypt enslaved Joseph's ancestors until Moses, a Jewish babe rescued and raised by Pharaoh's daughter, emerged as the one to demand that Pharaoh "let my people go" and led his people to the Promised Land. And **then** how that Promised Land ruled by mighty kings like David, Joseph's ancestor, fell to **other** powers, including of late the Romans, lost their independence and their glory, and, perhaps -- what they most feared -- their future.

Now God directed Joseph to take Mary and the child to Egypt, a place he'd never been, never seen, never wanted to visit, and to live there as refugees until God said it was safe to return home.

Refugees have never been popular; refugees have always had a hard time; it's not just a **contemporary** problem. But somehow, Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus made it to Egypt and began a new life there. And for that to happen, surely there had to be **some** persons, whose names we don't know, who helped the family on the way with directions, with food and water, with shelter, and with kindness. And surely there were **others**, **also** never named, who helped Joseph find a place to live in Egypt, helped him get work, helped Mary as she, a first-time mother,

struggled at times to care for her growing child. The names of these good neighbors who helped were never recorded. But, as we've seen with **contemporary** refugees, good neighbors are essential for safety and provisions, for introductions to a new culture, and to provide simple encouragement.

In our **own** time, in our **own** country, we know about refugees, how vulnerable they are – the adults as well as the children...even before draconian laws and punishing restrictions were enacted, even as removal is more likely than asylum or citizenship. A look at the news, a glance at the papers, an ear to the radio reveals that the first line of approach to these vulnerable ones is the assumption of guilt and the threat of harsh punishment, even removal to the country they fled or one they never visited. In many cases, they left their **own** country simply to protect their children, risking anything and everything for a chance at safety and opportunity.

When Jesus and his parents fled Bethlehem for Egypt, we sometimes imagine they were immediately provided safety and a warm welcome by the Egyptians. But not necessarily so. They – and no doubt others who fled there – were greeted with suspicion and complaints about how much they would cost the nation. Jesus' parents didn't speak the same language. They found their new neighbors wondering aloud if Joseph was going to take an **Egyptian's** job. And Mary worried where she was going to find their favorite foods and how they could keep practicing their religion. It was not unlike the experiences refugees **today** find in places where they've fled because they are no longer safe or wanted in their homeland, the country they know and love.

From being economically stable at home, Mary and Joseph found themselves on the margins in a strange new place, feeling very alone, grateful that their child was out of Herod's reach but sad to know so many others were not saved.

Yet somehow, by the grace of God, they didn't pass on bitterness or fear to their child. We know this, because we have seen Jesus all grown up in Nazareth and later in his ministry on the road. And who can say his experience as a refugee in Egypt didn't influence his practice of itinerant ministry, moving from place to place, often not having a place to lay his head. Or how he prioritized intentionally seeking out those who were marginalized and ostracized, warmly welcoming them, embracing them, and showing them God's own love and care.

Jesus' life was saved by God's intervention and his parents' obedience, so he was able to avoid death from Herod's soldiers. But as an adult, he didn't avoid suffering or death. He accepted them for **our** sake, so we might dare to believe suffering and death are not the last word for us or anyone else and trust that God's power to save and deliver is greater than evil's power to destroy, so we **too** may dare to hope and believe because: **wherever** we may find ourselves, in whatever Egypt we find ourselves welcomed or marooned, now we can trust that **God** will be there...indeed, God is **already** there! God meets us when we arrive, assuring us that we are not alone. God in Jesus comes to us as our fellow refugee, a seasoned refugee, who promises a safe home, a loving home – and calls us now in our churches and neighborhoods and cities to help make that home a reality. It's a tough calling, difficult to live out, and sometimes it can feel like too much. But God abides with us, even in our resistance and fear...and God will never leave us. Indeed, as Jesus himself said to his disciples, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end." Remember how, after the resurrection, Jesus didn't immediately escape to heaven. Instead, he returned to his disciples and stayed with them awhile, reassuring them, helping them to understand, and breathing new life and hope into them, so they could carry on. Whatever we fear will be our **end** becomes a new **beginning** when God in Jesus is there. As we heard in the **First** Reading, God is distressed by **our** distress and the troubles we face and sends,

not a messenger or an angel, but God's own presence to save us, to lift us up and carry us as we journey on.

And that presence is alive and with us **again** this morning, in the Word, yes, but also in the Holy Communion, where Christ comes to dwell **in** us and **with** us and gives us what we need to continue courageously in faith and hope and love. Then, nourished and fed, we are sent out to become Christ to those who are "refugees" even in their own country – people excluded, ridiculed, left out of the good things, and blamed for the bad. **We** are now to be with them and among them with love and compassion, offering help and the things they need to live. You and I, the community of Peace, are **already** doing this, and in this new year, I am sure the Spirit will show us how to do that in **new** ways.

But on **this** day, wherever we may find ourselves, in a comfortable and familiar place or an unfamiliar and scary place, we can trust that the Christ of Christmas is with us all the way and God's resolve to love us and save us still stands. So in that confidence we pray:

Almighty One, for your grace that has brought us safe thus far, and for your grace that will lead us on, we say, "Thank you." By that grace we now stand ready to follow you all the way...into an unknown Egypt or right back home. In Jesus' name, Amen.

