

Sermon for Christmas I—Year A 2019
From Flights of Angels to Fleeing for Their Lives

Now after they had left . . .

Isn't it strange that that is how our gospel for today begins.

We hear of the departure of the Magi before
we've heard the story of their arrival.

At least that's what happens as the readings are presented to us
in the liturgies of Christmas.

We won't hear the story of the wise men's arrival
until next Sunday when we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany.

Chronologically, the story goes like this:

Jesus is born.

The shepherds hear the proclamation of his born.

They come and see the newborn king.

They leave.

Then the magi make their visit
and they leave.

After everyone has left . . .

The holy family flees to Egypt.

According to the gospel of Matthew, then,
our manger scene here before the altar is wrong.

And so, in keeping with the gospel for today
and as a reminder—

My trusty assistant is taking away the shepherds and the sheep—
and leaving Mary and Joseph and Jesus all alone.

It's just the three of them, alone,
to face the nightmare of Herod's murderous rampage.

“Flee to Egypt”

With those words echoing in his ears,
Joseph got up, took the infant Jesus and Mary by night
and went Egypt.

Regardless of whether this story really happened the way
Matthew tells it, it’s not hard to know that it’s true.

The names and faces might change
but it’s a story that continues to be lived in lands
throughout the world today—even our own.

We’ve seen the pictures.

We’ve read the news.

We’ve heard and maybe even participated in the arguments over
what to do about this situation.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were not the first refugees
and, tragically, they are not the last.

Nor is the tragedy of the killings of the children of Bethlehem
the first or the last atrocity against holy innocents in this world.

Just a few nights ago we were singing “Silent Night” by
candlelight, and here we are this morning listening
to Matthew’s account of terror, murder, and furtive flight.

Talk about a downer!

Why does our Christmas celebration
have to include this reading?

God comes into our world
in an upside-down, inside-out kind of way,
and then all hell breaks loose.

Where’s the comfort and joy in that?

Perhaps the place to begin is by acknowledging the brokenness of our world and the stain of human sin that pervades the landscapes of our lives.

Real life involves real pain and suffering.

No one is spared forever,
and some experience more than their fair share of
disappointments, tragedy and hurts.

Evil is real, and every age has a Herod or two.

Life is not fair, and seeking the common good seems more
uncommon than ever.

What do you hear in today's gospel, in the flight to Egypt,
in the slaughter of the innocents?

What feelings does it evoke?

What images fill your mind's eye?

What prayers arise within you?

What experiences does it recall from your life?

What does it have to do with you and me?

I picture a little boy and his mom and dad.

Violence, a tyrant ruler,
an oppressive government,

the threat of death have them on the run.

They have left behind more than what they have taken.

I imagine the parents' fear and the knot in their stomachs.

I am certain their one thought,

their only priority, is to protect the child and keep him safe.

I see them making their way cautiously through the darkness of
night hoping not to be noticed.

With each passing moment they are a bit further

from the known and familiar,

a bit closer to the unknown and unfamiliar.

Can you hear their whispered questions?
When will we get there?
How much further is it?
What will we find?
What will it be like?
Will we find refuge and safety?

Such descriptions are not only about Jesus and Mary and Joseph,
they are part of any refugee family's experience.

Just a few short years ago,
we heard the story of two Syrian refugee families in the news
when one child arrived safely in Egypt
while the other child drowned
and washed up on a Turkish beach.

The picture of that child and the anguish of his father
was all over the news and the internet.

*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 . . .*

Rachel weeps . . . and Jesus weeps, too.

I cannot explain why one child found refuge
and the other didn't.

I don't know.

None of us does.

There are no good or acceptable reasons for that
but I can tell you what are *not* the reasons.

It is not because Jesus' life mattered more,
was more important, or more valuable than any other children.
It's not because God loves Jesus more than his other children.
It's not because Jesus is God's eternal son
and the other children are ordinary children of Bethlehem,
or Syria, or Somalia, Rwanda, or South America, or Mexico . . .

If we think it's any one of those things,
we have missed the point of Christmas.
We have denied that the Word became flesh—human flesh—
like all those other children, like yours, and like mine.
We have forgotten or not paid close enough attention to what we
have just heard in the letter to the Hebrews:

*Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood,
he himself likewise shared the same things . . .*

Jesus the Son of God shares our humanity
so that we might share in his divinity.

If the words of Hebrews and the Nicene Creed
mean anything at all,

it means that the depth and measure
of God's joy and thanksgiving that Jesus arrived in Egypt
is equaled only by the depth and measure
of God's anger and sorrow
when any other child in danger
does not reach a place of refuge and safety.

God's heart is with the refugee.

In the birth of Jesus,
in the angel of the Lord who spoke to Joseph in a dream,
and in the Holy Family's flight to Egypt,

God has revealed God-self to be aligned with the refugees of this world—not only with the children on the run and at the borders—but also with you and me.

And, if it sounds like I just named us as refugees—
Well, you heard that right.

In a sense we are all refugees—aliens in a foreign land,
a place that is not our ultimate home.

Citizens of the reign of God,
we dwell in tension between discipleship and culture,
between faith and fantasy,
and between the temporal and the eternal.

Our lives on this earth are temporary;
the moment we are born we begin the process dying.
And no, it's not particularly gratifying to ponder this reality on
the heels of one of the most blessed nights of the year,
a night when even the most marginally faithful among us desire
peace and good will toward all.

This is, however, the reality.

Jesus escaped the death Herod the Great sought for him,
but the powers of Empire, Herod's son,
and the religious leaders of his day would continue to seek his
undoing and demise throughout his short life.

Jesus didn't settle down in Nazareth with a wife,
and kids and cozy little house.

No, our Lord was constantly on the move
with no real place to call home or to lay his head.

Yet this carpenter and compassionate rabbi
was God incarnate—the Savior of the world
walking around in skin and bones,

modeling a way of living and being for us,
and ushering in the ultimate reign of eternal peace and grace-full
salvation—of which we—his baptized children—
are commissioned to help manifest in this time and place.

We may not have had the same experience as Jesus and the Holy
Family or the experience of the refugees of today,
but we share a common story and a common status.
Herod is not just a king of Israel some two thousand years ago.
In every age Herod is the power, circumstances, and abuses
that disrupt and seek to destroy life and the common good.
Herod is that one, a person or a system, who creates refugees.
For every refugee there is a Herod,
and there are all sorts of refugees and all kinds of Herods.

You see, being a refugee is not only about tyrant kings,
oppressive governments, and threats of death.
It's also about a deep longing and drive for a new life
and a new place in life.
It's hearing and responding to the nighttime call of God.
The refugee life is neither easy nor safe,
but we never go alone.
God goes with us.
We go with the God of refugees,
the God who “has nowhere to lay his head.”
We go with the promise that our Egypt has already been
sanctified and prepared by the presence of the One
who is “the pioneer of our salvation.”
This child knows the way.

Every time I hear today's gospel,
every time I read about refugees in today's news,
every time I reflect on my own refuge status
and my times in Egypt I cannot help but wonder, what if.
What if Egypt had closed the borders of its heart?
What if the Holy Family had arrived only to find
a wall and locked doors?
What if the wannabe Pharaohs had unleashed on them
the dogs of fear and prejudice?
What if the Egyptian people had said,
"There's no room for you here."
What story would we be telling today?
Would there be any good news for the refugees of the world?
For you? For me? What then?

But that didn't happen.
Perhaps Egypt remembered.
Perhaps Egypt remembered another time,
another Joseph,
another refugee people.
Perhaps God sent the Holy Family
to a land that would remember.
Perhaps God was hoping and counting on Egypt to remember it
had once been a place of refuge for his people,
and it could be again.
What if we, too, might remember?
What if we too might remember the Holy Family and
the refugees in the news and our own flights to Egypt.
Oh, that we might remember it all!
And then . . . hold out your hands for the bread and wine of
Christ, the holy Refugee's, supper.

Hang on every word from the Word made flesh
and listen for that still small voice of God
calling your name and bidding you home,
for out of Egypt God has called the Son,
and this Son is your hope and your salvation.

The Christmas story continues.
And all of us—from the every corner of the earth—
are part of the plot line.
Thanks be to God!