

Sermon – Matthew 2:13-23
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Grace Lutheran Church
1 Christmas – Year A
29 December 2019

“Merry Christmas?”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. On the fifth day of Christmas my true love gave to me a harsh return to reality. Of course, the world has moved on from Christmas. I haven't been in a store lately, but I imagine there are Valentine's Day candies on display, if not Easter bunnies and Fourth of July fireworks. The big to-do has come and gone, the pews a little emptier. But for the Church, Christmas Day is just the beginning of the season, not its end. Reading today's gospel, however, I find myself wishing that we had moved on, too, because after the angels return to heaven and the shepherds go to tell, the story goes to hell. The local king, Herod, was a deranged ruler who, though but a puppet king, reigned with an iron fist. Like coward kings of every time and place, he would brook no challenge to his authority. He even killed his wife and one of his sons to shore up his own power. Imagine how he felt when these Magi from the East brought news of a newborn king. After the Magi depart without giving Jesus and his parents away to Herod, the king becomes furious. Incensed, he sends his soldiers to find and kill every child in Bethlehem of or under the age of two. While tradition has inflated the number of slaughtered innocents into the tens or even hundreds of thousands, the actual population of Bethlehem dictates that likely only twenty little boys were killed. *Only*. Can you put that word in front of any number of murdered babies, each one taken from the hands of a loving parent? Merry Christmas, indeed.

2. Jesus, of course, escapes. Although born to die, it was not yet his time. Matthew is intent on connecting Jesus' story to the story of Israel. So as Joseph, the son of Rachel and Jacob, once saved his people in Egypt, so now does Joseph, with Mary, save the hope of their people by fleeing to Egypt. The preacher David Lose recounts the story of receiving a gift upon his ordination. An older pastor gave him a painting of the flight to Egypt. Such scenes usually depict three figures, those of the holy family. In this painting, however, Jesus and his parents were just three among a throng of refugees, all of whom were fleeing from Herod's oppression, desperate for a better life, willing to risk the dangers of the desert and the challenge of border crossing. For them, all of them, the only thing more dangerous than a refugee's journey was staying home. In his Incarnation, we hear today that not only does Jesus take on our human lot; he takes on the worst of it, the most desperate, and plants God's presence in the midst of desperation. If you want to find Jesus, look among the refugees of this world, especially the children. This means, sadly, that Jesus will be easy to find. According to UNICEF, there are around 50 million children in the world who are refugees, migrants, or internally displaced persons – forced to flee brutal conflict, extreme hunger, or both. In our country this year, we set a new record for detaining children – we held about children 70,000 in custody. But each of these children, before they bear any designation, is first a child. A child of God, for that matter. They didn't choose where or into what circumstances they would be born.

3. But God did choose when and where to be born. God chose not only to take on our mortal flesh and our earthly lot, God chose to do it in the midst of those who are truly the least of these – the least in terms of worldly standards, but not the least or the lowest in the eyes of God. Not the least loved. And so God is born into this deepest of human plights, a child born to desperate parents in dark times. But in their escape to Egypt, we hear echoes from the past. Just as Joseph found safety for his people in Egypt, so did Joshua – Yeshua, bearing the same name given to the Son of God – lead his

- people back from Egypt, back to the Promised Land. We see in the escape of infant Jesus that the stage is set for his return, a return that would enact a gospel of salvation for the sake of all people. We see the promise of a new land beyond sin and death, a world in which every tear of every terrified, grieving parent is lovingly wiped away by God's own hand. A kingdom in which every child lost for any reason is a child now found and loved forever.
4. Yes, it is tempting to skip over this part of the story, to focus on what's good in our own lives. After all, Christmas morning found my children in a warm house with plenty to eat and with gifts under the tree. With loving parents and with the world's deck stacked in their favor. But we can't dwell upon the idyllic. The gospel won't allow it. The point is not that you or I should feel bad about how our children celebrated Christmas. The point is that we, the people of God, should rise up to seek such blessings for *all* the little children of the world. The preacher Tom Troeger, reflecting upon how Joseph's story began with a dream, wonders if we can "imagine the dream [we] wish Joseph could have, the dream of a world where, instead of having to flee, the refugee family would find itself at last welcome and secure. Imagine what the Christmas carols would sound like if we brought that dream alive. How would 'Silent Night, Holy Night' sound in our hearts if we had helped to create a world in which baby Jesus would never again be refugee Jesus?"
 5. Jesus' life rushes headfirst into human desperation and stands steadfast against human tyranny. The death he avoids as a child he will welcome as an adult. In his dying, in submitting to power and cruelty, Jesus undoes the forces of evil. In his resurrection, his victory is shown forth for all time. Jesus gives his body for us, this same body upon which we will feast in the sacrament. As Jesus gives himself to us, is taken into us, we find ourselves called, compelled, to go where he would go. To be his Body in the world in the places he would put his Body. To stand with and for those for whom he would stand. To shun power and to love those with nowhere else to go. To

find ways to welcome those fleeing danger and persecution, those who just want a chance at life before death.

6. While it may feel like today's Gospel is missing the requisite Christmas cheer, perhaps we just don't have a broad enough view of what God has done at Christmas. When God enters in, this is what happens. The world fights back against God, and God takes a divine stand with the downtrodden. But in the Christ child, as we'll sing in a few minutes, "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." Jesus gives hope to those who live in fear and instills fear in those whose hope is in their own power and might. So, friends, as we celebrate Christmas for another week and as we bear the cross of Christ into the New Year, let us remember the journey of our incarnate God into this world. Jesus made his home in the midst of the homeless so that he could lead them home. May you work and pray in the same direction, always remembering the children of this world. Your God, after all, was once one of them. Your God loves them still. Today's only the fifth day of Christmas. Keep celebrating. Welcome the Christ child. Welcome all children. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.