

“Sojourners”

Jan. 1, 2016 – 1st of Christmas

Isaiah 63:7-9

63:7 I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD, the praiseworthy acts of the LORD, because of all that the LORD has done for us, and the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. 3:8 For he said, "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely"; and he became their savior 63:9 in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

Hebrews 2:10-18

2:10 It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. 2:11 For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, 2:12 saying, "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you." 2:13 And again, "I will put my trust in him." And again, "Here am I and the children whom God has given me." 2:14 Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 2:15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. 2:16 For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. 2:17 Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. 2:18 Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Matthew 2:13-23

2:13 Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." 2:14 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 2:15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

2:19 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 2:20 "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead."

2:21 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

2:22 But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. 2:23 There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

Coming over early this morning through the quiet streets of my neighborhood it was a little sad to see that many of the houses that just a week ago were so brightly declaring the dawn of Christmas day were dark. Only a week since Christmas day and trees lie in the gutter, recycle bins are full of colorful wrapping paper, and our friends in the retail world rapidly remove the green from Christmas red and green, leaving only the Red for Valentine's Day. Yes, to our culture, Christmas has past, "been there, done that."

Of course Carols seem to fade away quicker than ever when they have been played since September. Even the nativity scene on the hearth, the one with one wise man missing and Joseph holding onto air cause his staff broke off, has been wrapped in the old newspaper and put in the box with the straw. With proper reverence and care baby Jesus is wrapped up in tissue paper, slid into a baggie, and back in the box....in flight to the attic where he will be safe until needed again.

Try as we might to hold onto Christmas it escapes in the transition to a New Year and even though it would be nice to dwell awhile, to stare into the stable and spy the babe in the manger, and feel the warmth and experience the angels songs....it all too quickly goes away. It's back to work and another calendar filled with 359 what we hope to be better days until Christmas rolls around again.

For the Church, however, Christmas is not a bygone memory. We do our best to keep our hearts filled with Advent hope. As Christian people we can still smell the smoky tallow of Christmas eve candles being extinguished and feel the warmth of the hugs we shared and can hear in the crisp night air the sound of Merry Christmas ringing and in spite of what some might say that's a feeling we want to last. We want the world to know that for the Church, Christmas is not just a day, but a season, something to be celebrated fully and for a good period of time – for at least 12 days. The gift of God's presence among us, Emmanuel "God with us" is more than worthy of a lengthy celebration. The culture may say "been there, done that" about Christmas, but here the voice of the Church continues to ring out clearly and faithfully, celebrating the birth of God in our midst, even when the cultures attention has turned elsewhere.

We should probably talk resolutions on this January 1st , but even in the church the lectionary betrays us and in only a week, before the shepherds can sing a second chorus of 'angels we have heard on high,' Mary finds herself mounted up on that little donkey's back only now she carries a baby. No doubt she would have preferred to stay awhile but without so much as a moment for a pondering Mary to write thank you notes to those Wise Men for those really beautiful gifts who have reportedly already headed back east by another way, or to get a snap shot of old Joseph snuggling the babe, because of another angelic visitation in a dream, we find Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus have also packed

up their meager belongings, loaded that poor donkey and are on the way to Egypt. Egypt mind you. Not home. Egypt.

Matthew's story of the "flight to Egypt" or the more graphic, 'slaughter of the innocents' comes to us at a time when our culture is on a "flight from Christmas." Sadly, on this first Sunday in a new year we know that as the ball dropped last night we continue to live in a world where innocents are slaughtered daily and the problems of families seeking a safe place for survival is as acute as ever.

The babe in the manger is not allowed to be a babe for long. The world in which he lived, not unlike our world, is a cruel one in which there are dangers and threats to the well being of anything that is pure and good. Around the world literally millions take flight each day to escape the evils that bear in upon them from hunger and poverty, from domestic violence and child abuse, from political oppression, from economic realities that take people living at home and make them into people living on the streets searching for a place to stay. And of course that timeless entity when it comes to driving people into exile – senseless war.

Here, in the church we linger a moment longer. We learn not to despair because Christmas begins a process in which we are liberated from such evil. All of the sights and smells and songs and stories remind us that Christmas is all about God coming and getting into the fray with us. Jesus became one of us. Just as vulnerable in his innocence.

(Re-Pace, faster) Fearing for the safety of his family in a time of political unrest, Joseph tells his wife to take what she can from their belongings and prepare to flee. They make their way to a foreign land, where they must experience something few of us have ever known. They become members of a minority culture and a minority religion. They are in the vulnerable, exposed condition of being dependent upon the hospitality of those more powerful than they. There are few human conditions more powerless than that of the refugee.

The Egyptian customs agent who questioned the Judean refugee family had no idea that the child bundled close to Mary's heart was the savior of the world. He defined them as just another foreign immigrant family. But we know better. The millions of displaced and wandering peoples that appear in our media day after day are defined as refugees, and government agencies keep statistics on them in order to seek some control over them. But we know better.

“Mary, Joseph, and the baby is Jesus”, says the father, who for the second time in their short marriage is seeking some safe place for his little family to reside. They are faceless statistics. Three more mouths to feed and bodies to shelter among the millions of displaced. Dare we think for a moment that these three are the only ones fleeing the rampage of Herod? They are three among many seeking refuge in Egypt or any other place that would take them. They are three among millions upon millions who have done the same since. Who hearing the pervasive warning of dread or danger flee from the impoverished nations of

Africa, from the factories of America's rust belt, from the no place of Palestine; from failed farms in the rural south, from Burma and Tibet; of course from Iraq and Afghanistan and of late most desperately of all places in the world from the intense cruelty at work in Syria. If we tried to simply list, not even really pray for, but just list all of the places the refugees flee as we offer our Prayers of the People here each week, we would either soon feel overwhelmed by the enormity of that list.

These 20th century refugees; Marys, Josephs, and children like Jesus fleeing the violence of our modern day Herods. Maybe you've seen them on TV, and turned away either physically or consciously because their plight is so far beyond us with the critically non-christian thought, 'they are not our problem.' Dare we think that at least a portion of the homeless in this country are not refugees of an unforgiving economy and an uncaring populous that allows it to happen? Where do we think the people we host for Family Promise come from? They are not on vacation. *(Pause)*

What amazing plan of God is it that sends this holy family on the road again, in danger again, so that we and the whole world might know from the truth dripping from old Isaiah's words, "It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old." God becomes present to us, for us, in us,

and flees along side the fleeing, entering their plight, becoming one of them. And one of us.

So what do we do with this new year. How do we finish the sentence, “I resolve to...?” What do we do as we inevitably move away from the cozy warmth of Christmas displayed in pure white on the table there to the more demanding call of our living represented in this piece here? What do we do in order to find ourselves? In order to honor the babe of Bethlehem in our living? I hope with all my heart that one thing we pledge and promise to do is faithfully stand and watch as Joseph tugs on the donkey upon which Mary sits precariously pondering ‘what next?’ with a very young swaddled child in arms, a single carpet bag with all their worldly possessions inside. Watch them, and may our hearts go out to them, setting off in profound faith in God, waiting for a word that it might be safe to go home.

I hope that we won't forget that they found a place to sojourn in Egypt. I hope we realize that there was no border guard repelling them, no fence along a border to keep them out, no sign of desperate hatred like a wall dividing the ancient people of God in a very modern way in the country of Jesus' birth. I hope that we remember that ‘no room in the inn’ doesn't mean we stop seeking a solution to the problem of the homeless person, or the refugee. I hope we respect the right of every child, EVERY child to grow strong to their full physical, mental and emotional stature in favor with God and all people. I hope before we

make judgments and make decisions based on economic or political expedience that we will remember that the one born shrouded in angelic announcement was soon whisked off becoming a refugee for us.

That he has taken flight so that he will be preserved for us to live...and set this table for us... and in God's time die for us...but now....we sing and celebrate the new born king...who came to call all refugees to himself....and that, my friends is indeed why we so tenaciously cling – to the child of Christmas.