

ways and keep Christ's spirit alive in the world. May we stretch our own abilities and vision about the ways we can seek to serve Christ, who comes to us in the footsteps of every person that passes through our door.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church  
of Royal Oak

January 1, 2023  
First Sunday of Christmas  
"Jesus the Refugee"  
Rev. Emma Nickel  
Scripture: Matthew 2:13-23

In the cinematic version of the Christmas story, the picture begins with a tight close-up on the stable. We see the baby Jesus snugly sleeping in the manger, wrapped up tight. Mary and Joseph are close by, trying to rest but also, like any new parent, looking over every few minutes to make sure the baby is breathing. The animals rustle in the hay. Today, the camera pans outward. We begin to notice that there is more going on in this scene than we first thought. As the picture slowly moves out to show us the flickering lights of Bethlehem, we pan past King Herod's home and hear the mad ruler inside yelling about a small baby who Herod thinks is threatening his rule. Farther still, we see the small villages where families have begun to hear word that the King is up to something. Should they be worried? What could they do to stop him anyway? Finally, the camera zooms out toward the vast territory of Egypt, where we notice homes with doors open and food on the table. Things look welcoming there. This image of Egypt is not the one we are familiar with in Biblical stories of the Old Testament, where Egypt represents slavery and death. But the picture is clear and the faces of the people there are filled with kindness.

This movie-worthy story of King Herod feeling threatened by the power of a child is not a new story. We know the contours of it well from the Exodus account. That's the one where the Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt and God called Moses to help the people to freedom in the promised land. Matthew means for that story to echo in our ears as he shares Jesus' story. We are meant to see the evil of Pharaoh embodied in King Herod. We are meant to shake our heads in disbelief as both those leaders ordered the killing of innocent children. To see them shaking with anger and fear at Hebrew babies and Jesus himself who seemed to threaten their own stranglehold on power. We are meant to see how leaving Egypt was a trip of freedom and blessing, when the Hebrews crossed the Red Sea and when the holy family returned to Galilee.

1 Charlotte Hilton Andersen, "Welcoming Ukrainian Refugees: 13 Stories that will renew your faith in humanity," Readers Digest, <https://www.rd.com/list/ukrainian-refugees/>

2 Andrew Clark Whaley, Pastoral Perspective, Luke 2:1-7, *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke Vol 1*, p 36.

Even today, this story of power-hungry rulers and the deaths of innocent children is not new. This past year we witnessed the flight of Ukrainian children to Poland, bundled in their winter coats, holding stuffed animals, standing next to mothers with stricken faces. And in this new year, war continues. Threats to life, the need to flee, it all goes on still. This story is as old as time, as they say, whether it's in our own country's history, or in Afghanistan or Syria, Tunisia or Central America. The corruption of power threatens the promise of life.

God does not want or will any of this evil action, then or now. It stems from human sin and selfishness. And we can expect it to continue until the day God comes to wipe every tear away - when finally, there will be no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain. This story of Jesus' family struggling to face the reality of evil in the world shows us plainly that God meant for Jesus to encounter real life, in all its ugliness and heartache. But even more so, that God meant to preserve this child so that Jesus could fulfill his mission of loving the world into wholeness. In Jesus' flight to Egypt, we see the hand of God working to protect him. Just as God was at work keeping Mary safe when Jesus was born. Just as God was at work, even in surprising ways, when Jesus later faced another Roman ruler in Pilate. Just as God was at work when the tomb turned up empty three days later. God was doing something amazing in bringing Jesus into the world. And in allowing him to face the threat of evil and harm that is real for so many, in all its different forms.

This is not the joyous Christmas story we hope to get on this eighth day of Christmas. The good news in this story is there. It just doesn't bowl us over. We have to look for it tucked in between the lines we read. It's there in the news of God's presence amid danger. It's there in the revelation that someone in Egypt welcomed Jesus' family. Someone provided a place of shelter. Someone offered food and enough clothes to get the family through. Someone said to his family, "come in and stay," rather than slamming the door in their face. We don't know what that welcome looked like or who might have offered it. We don't know if there were other refugees fleeing Herod's wrath, or just Jesus' family. We don't know how long the family stayed, whether they made friends, or how life in Egypt was. But we know that Jesus found safety among the people there. He and his earthly parents were sheltered long enough to be able to wait things out and finally return back to their own country, something modern day refugees often don't get to do.

God became human. And then, God relied on the support of other people to make sure the Christ child could accomplish his work—even people in

a foreign land who were known for their enslavement of Jesus' ancestors. That kind of support happens every day, even though we rarely hear about it. Reader's Digest compiled stories of people who showed that kind of hospitality to fleeing Ukrainians this past year.<sup>1</sup> There was an organization of teenagers in Romania who set up a stand at the border to offer hot drinks to refugees fleeing the war. There was a German man who drove 11 hours to the Poland-Ukraine border simply to find a family to help. He held up a sign that said, "transfer and accommodation" and within an hour was driving Bulia Muhammad and her kids to his house in Germany. There is chef Jose Andres whose service organization, World Central Kitchen, springs into action at all kinds of disasters to help those in need. Chefs and volunteers served meals along the border and in Warsaw and Krakow, Poland to those finding their footing in a new country. There are countless other stories of people who helped and continue to help. Maybe not the people you'd always expect. Maybe just regular people through whom God's Spirit works to offer shelter, food, safety, and warmth to those whose lives have been shattered.

As commentator Andrew Clark Whaley puts it, "these are the communities who show up with casseroles when a loved one dies. These are the communities who show acts of mercy each day without recognition on the nightly news or in the local paper... There is a place for these ordinary communities that quietly birth God's will into the world each day, communities... who obediently and without fanfare enact the world-changing will of God. These are women and men whose love for God shapes their lives in the empire."<sup>2</sup> In *our* support of one another; in our service to our neighbors, we serve the Christ child and the risen Christ. With the guidance of the Spirit, we seek to ensure that God's mission is still being accomplished among us. This kind of service is not flashy. It might even get written out of the story, just like the service of the people in Egypt did from Matthew's gospel. But this kind of service is good news for God's world.

The Christmas season ends soon. We've entered the New Year. It'll be back to regular life in a couple days. Jesus entered the world on a silent night when things seemed holy and peaceful. But quickly, he entered the regularity of life which includes danger and despair. He had to face evil and even the threat of death. But he also received the hospitality and kindness of regular people, in a country not very beloved by his family; from people who kept him alive and focused on his mission for God. As we witness the destructive powers in our world, may we respond like the people in Egypt did: by offering mercy and kindness. May we continue to serve in our quiet