

## **Christmas 1, Year A,**

Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh

29<sup>th</sup> December, 2019

### **Isaiah 63:7-9 NRSV / Matthew 2:13-23 NRSV**

Well, the candles of Advent and Christmas Eve have gone out,

the family gatherings are winding down,

and in a couple of days we'll ring in the new year.

Soon we'll be taking down the decorations and putting them away until next year.

In our biblical story, Jesus is now in the world with us, the wise men are heading home.

Soon we'll celebrate Epiphany and settle into "normal time"

for a couple of months until Lent and Easter.

So is that it? Are we done with Christmas? Is that all that it's about?

Candles and decorations, carols and food, family and friends?

Or is there a little more to it than that?

Certainly we recognize the impact of the arrival of Jesus, God with us,

the light of the world.

Yet I don't think we necessarily give thought

to the full impact of that event to the world in which we live.

Our narrative often jumps from the Nativity to the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

While there is a large gap covering his childhood,

Matthew's version of events from our lesson today

sheds a little more light on how far-reaching

the impact of his arrival could be.

Jesus' arrival was not a welcome event for those at the top.

The revelation of the wise men to Herod that a new king, a messiah, had been born would hit him where it hurts the most.

Herod the Great was a savvy politician

who had schemed his way from being appointed the governor of Galilee to being appointed "King of the Jews" by the Roman Senate.

His reputation for brutality was well-known;

he was known to have murdered members of his own family to consolidate and maintain his power and control.

He did realize, however, that it was important

to keep the right groups happy and content, in order to maintain their support of his rule.

Being a foreign convert to Judaism,

it was important that he go above and beyond to ensure he had the backing of the somewhat skeptical religious elite.

During his reign, he commissioned great building works,

including the rebuilding of the Temple Mount and the expansion of the Second Temple.

He made a point to include the Pharisees and Saducees in the planning, to further galvanize their support.

He built the great port of Caesarea, as well as pagan temples outside the Jewish areas,

to placate the new Roman emperor Augustus,  
as well as the Greek and Roman noble classes.

Probably most important to him, however,

were the heavily fortified palaces he built throughout Judea.

His rule was under constant threat

from those who questioned his legitimacy,

and he was never far from a stronghold

that he and his own private army

could hunker down in if need be.

He was a man who saw threats all around

and brutally eliminated any perceived danger or disloyalty,

even from his own wife and sons,

three of whom were executed by Herod.

So this child born in Bethlehem was yet another threat to his rule to be dealt with.

The foreign magi had betrayed him.

He felt his rule was in jeopardy, so he resorted to what he knew best,

violence and suppression.

Yet he was not successful.

Christmas meant more than just a threat to Herod's rule.

The God of Isaiah, the God who is present with his children in their distress,

their savior, who through his love for them redeems them,

lifts them up and carries them.

This is the God at work in Matthew.

This God through dreams sends the Magi home a different way,  
this God sends Joseph and the Holy Family into exile, as refugees,  
away from the threat of Herod.

This God's love is present with them  
as they seek the shelter and kindness of foreigners in a strange country.

This God leads them again to the safety of another strange city,  
in a strange province to start anew.

It is really a story of love, of God's love not only for Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus,  
but for all of God's human children.

Isaiah was written for a whole people who found themselves refugees in their own land.

After years of forced exile in a foreign land,  
they were allowed to return home if they choose,  
yet the land that awaited them was not what they expected.

They found a hard life of struggling to rebuild,  
yet still oppressed by foreign powers and oppression.

Yet God's loving presence was with them, redeeming them,  
lifting and carrying them through their hardship.

The Gospel of Matthew was originally written in Hebrew  
for the early Jewish church in Jerusalem.

From the perspective of the Jewish followers,  
who would have been well-versed in the writings of the Old Testament,  
relating this story at the beginning of Christ's life  
would have a deeper significance.

The story of massacre  
and the salvation of one child  
who would become a heroic figure,  
strongly parallels the story of Moses being saved as an infant.

This allusion is further reinforced  
by a sort of “reverse” Exodus,  
with the young family fleeing to Egypt  
to escape persecution.

The reference in Matthew to Jeremiah 31,  
in which he writes how Rachel  
will weep for her children who “are no more,”  
connects this event to fulfilling that prophesy of Jeremiah.

To the early followers of Matthew,  
this story would strongly tie Jesus  
to the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament,  
and fit in with their traditions and history.

The Christmas story isn't just a story about light entering the world  
and not being overcome by darkness.

It's a love story. It's a story of love personified.

I John 4 tells us,

“Let us love one another, for love comes from God.

Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us:

He sent his one and only Son into the world  
that we might live through him.”

God is all about love. So what about us, what are we called to?

Well, some clues can be found in our first reflection, “The Work of Christmas.”

That is all about love and compassion.

We live love. God models love in both our lessons from scripture today.

You are present with those who are in need; those who are oppressed.

You lift up the downtrodden, you redeem the refugee.

We still live in a world with Herods,

those whose power depends on eliminating threats to that power;  
who cannot tolerate dissent.

And like the historical Herod, those men also create the refugees of today,

those who flee from violence and brutality,  
seeking the protection and kindness of strangers in places foreign to them,  
places where they hope to find refuge and safety.

Do we see the face of Mary, of Joseph, of Jesus,

in those who seek refuge on our shores?

Do we see Jesus in the faces of the 69,500 migrant children

who were held in US government custody this year,  
many forcibly separated from their parents indefinitely?



Are we the loving presence we're called to be by a God who is love  
to the 4000 kids still in concentration camps  
in the deserts of our border regions,  
kids who aren't even allowed to sing Christmas carols?  
To paraphrase a popular song,  
do they even know it's Christmas time at all?

Worldwide there are 70.8 million refugees

and every day 37,000 more people are forced to flee their homes

due to persecution or violence.

Fear, and the anger and hate that stem from it, are on the rise worldwide,

bolstered by a new wave of nationalism,

a new wave of us versus them mentality.

In Christ's eyes, there is only we.

This morning, let us consider what it means for us to live love

like the God of Isaiah, the God of Joseph, the child born in Bethlehem.

Are we doing everything we can to show love and inclusion

instead of hate and exclusion?

How can we as Christ's body in this world get involved

to show love to those modern refugees

that seek safety and shelter among us from the Herods of this world?

What difference would it make, if instead of seeing random refugee faces,

we instead viewed each face as that of Joseph, of Mary, of Jesus?

I would hope we can change our perspective, and ask ourselves in any situation,

where is the love and more importantly,

how can I live love in everything I and we say and do.

May it be so. Amen.