

Worship Service *“Radical Love”*

Christmas 1, Year A, 1st January, 2023

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

Prelude

Opening Music (Video) [*A Voice Was Heard in Ramah*](#)

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Welcome Guests / Announcements

Pass the Peace

Opening Hymn *Praise to the Lord, the Almighty* 37

Call to Worship [responsive]

One: Make a list of God’s gracious dealings, all the things
God has done that need praising:

**All: The generous bounties of God, and God’s great goodness to all the families
of the earth! Compassion lavished, love extravagant.**

One: The most wondrous thing God ever did was to come to us, to help us in
person. Out of God’s own love, God redeemed us.

**All: God rescued us and carried us for a longtime. Let us worship and praise
our Redeemer this Christmas time!**

Invocation

Loving God, creator of all that is, and lover of all that you have created; we gather us
as a new people this day. Fill us with thankfulness for the year which has passed, and
with encouragement as we enter a new one. As Christ’s glory was made manifest so
long ago as child who drew the honor of nations, let the fullness of his glory be seen
in us, his body, the church. May the new covenants we make in your name be
blessed and made fruitful through the days of ministry which lie before us as your
people of faith. And may this time of worship empower us to live in communion with
you, now and always. This we pray in the name of Christ our Lord who taught us to
pray saying,...

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those
who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen*

Prophetic Reading: **Isaiah 63:7-9 NRSV**

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.

For he said, "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely"; and he became their savior

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.

Hymn *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* **165**

A Time of Prayer

Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer

In peace with God and with one another, let us offer to God our hearts desires and our concerns for our world and ourselves. Let us pray.

To you, O giver of joy, we praise you that in the fullness of time you came to be with us and to give us hope, peace and the joy of eternal life. We thank you that in Mary you found one who would willingly give over control of her life, trusting in you, for the sake of your love of us.

We rejoice that we have received grace upon grace in the giving of your Son Jesus Christ to be our Savior. Forgive us for our frequent unwillingness to let your joy spring to life in our midst, and the self-centeredness that has kept us from reveling in the fullness of your joy. Refashion us that we might recognize the greatness of your gift, and to release the joy that you have planted deeply within us in creation and in our baptism.

Because you have made us for joy, Lord, we are burdened to see a world that is limp and joyless. As trouble, oppression, grief and sorrow pervades our world, the joy of life seems to fade from our sight. Yet, we have been called by you to entrust our world's needs, and our own, to your safekeeping, trusting that you, in your right time,

will bring to fruition your promise of redemption. Inspire us to trust you more, and to joyfully bring to our world the news of your presence in our midst.

We pray for all your children in their need. To those who are fearful and oppressed, give freedom; to those who are hungry and homeless, give help; to those who are lonely and grieving, give your peace; and to those who are sick, give healing and hope. As we give thanks for all your saints who rest in peace with you, we offer to you our lives afresh. Make us to walk in your paths of righteousness and peace, and fill us with joy, as we pray in Christ's name, Amen

Gospel Reading: Matthew 2:13-23 NRSV

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."

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 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."

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.

Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

"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."

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said,

"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."

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

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.

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."

Message *Radical Love*

Well, the candles of Advent and Christmas Eve have gone out, the family gatherings are winding down, and we've just rung 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 Epiphany will come and pass and we will settle into liturgical “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 Sadducees 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 a poem by theologian and civil rights leader Howard Thurman called "*The Work of Christmas:*"

*"When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart. "*

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?

To paraphrase a popular song, *“Do they even know it’s Christmas time at all?”*

Worldwide there are 100 million refugees 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.

A Call to Serve

By the goodness of God, we are called into the family of the church. By God’s grace, we rejoice to share in the church’s life of mission and ministry. Let us take time this morning to reflect on what gifts we can share for God’s glory as a token of the offering of our very lives.

A Time for Reflection - Musical Interlude

The Prayer of Thanksgiving

O God, through the offering of these gifts, we become a more open people—open-minded in hearing your word and wisdom, open-hearted in healing a broken world, open-handed in heeding your call to charity and enacted love. With thanks for all good gifts, we present a portion of our substance and the whole of ourselves. Amen.

Hymn ***You are Salt for the Earth*** **226**

Benediction

Through him, with him, and in him, in the power of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor be to you, O God, now and forever. **Amen.**