

SERMON "Then and Now"
Olivet Congregational Church, UCC
Reverend Lisa Eleck, MDiv
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SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 63: 7-9

God's Mercy Remembered

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.

Matthew 2: 13-23

The Escape to Egypt

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 fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

The Massacre of the Infants

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.'

The Return from Egypt

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.'

SERMON "Then and Now"

We have been rejoicing. We have savored the familiar gospel passages of Christmas and Epiphany. Our nativity sets have reminded us of these stories. We have been singing carols that have been sung for generations, celebrating the events of Jesus birth.

Jesus is born. Angels announced his birth to shepherds who were awestruck when they saw him. They left his presence rejoicing and spreading the good news. A star appeared in the heaven to wise men who had been looking for it. They followed that star so that they might pay homage to a newborn king. They brought extravagant gifts that were intended for a king, but found a child of parents of humble means in a lowly abode. Still, they paid homage to the child.

But then we get to this morning's passage. Herod had learned about a newborn king from the Magi. That newborn king would threaten his reign, which Herod would never tolerate. So Herod called for the massacre of innocent children in Bethlehem. While there is no other historical source that describes this atrocity (maybe because the number of infants would be small), there is historical evidence of Herod's brutality. It includes his private security force, orders to kill descendants of his political rivals, orders that his own wife and son be executed when he thought they were plotting against him, and his order that political prisoners should be killed upon his death so that the people would be in

mourning.¹ So it would not be out of character for Herod to order the murder of innocent children.

But God was with Joseph, Mary and Jesus. An angel again appeared to Joseph in a dream. The angel warned Joseph of Herod's plans and told him to flee to Egypt. Joseph again had great faith; to awaken his family and make the trek to Egypt.

Remember, historically, Egypt was not a welcoming place for the Israelites. The Israelites had been enslaved in Egypt. Pharaoh had even ordered male Jewish babies to be murdered in Moses day. Fortunately through the creative thinking of his sister, Moses survived, was taken into Pharaoh's household but nursed by his own mother. And we know the story of Moses, who led his people out of Egypt.

But back to Joseph and his family. Joseph again trusted the angel in his dream. Taking his wife and son to Egypt, they fled to Egypt.

As you look at the cover to your bulletin, Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman the artist who painted this piece, shared her reflection on the story of the Holy Family's journey, which we see in her painting. She describes the courage that Joseph would have needed to leave all that he knew to flee to a country that was historically problematic for his ancestors. Rev. Pittman, explains that she painted the shadowy figures in the background to represent on one side, Herod's men who were a threat to Jesus, and on the other side, the Egyptians who oppressed and enslaved the Joseph's people in the past. But painted in the center, she explains, "The angel of God envelops the Holy Family in an embrace, comforting them from the grief of leaving home and shielding them from the fear of what is to come. In other icons of this pilgrimage, the Nile River often flows below, teeming with fish, but I chose to fill the water with lotus flowers, Egypt's national flower and a symbol of regeneration. God is writing a new story, transforming their destination, which swells with generational trauma and pain, into a haven of refuge and rebirth."

So Joseph and his family entered this new chapter in their lives as refugees in a foreign land, with a people who were historical enemies and oppressors of Joseph's ancestors. And for two years, Joseph, Mary and Jesus, a refugee family, lived in Egypt.

¹ David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors. Feasting on the Word, Year A Volume 1. Exegetical Perspective on Matthew 2:13-23 by R. Allen Culpepper. p 165-167.

Have you ever stopped to wonder what it was like for Joseph, Mary, and Jesus to live in Egypt? These parents and their infant fled to a land with different customs, a different language, and a different faith. What was it like for them not to have family nearby? Were they able to find a welcoming community – perhaps with other young mothers or perhaps older women who would support Mary as a young mother? Was Joseph able to find work as a carpenter? Or did they have to rely on the generosity of strangers in a strange land? And how long did Joseph, Mary and Jesus have to rely on the hospitality and generosity of strangers?

We would hope that this refugee family was accepted where they settled, that the people in Egypt, that foreign land, would have acknowledged the fear that caused them to leave Bethlehem. Hopefully the people would have recognized the stress and anxiety that the Holy Family had faced in making their decision to flee. We would hope that the people in Egypt would have understood the difficult nature of the journey for the young family with little or nothing to their name – presumably the clothing on their backs and, maybe, a few carpentry tools.

The plight of this refugee family over 2000 years ago would not have been easy. But Joseph and Mary had faith in God. They trusted in the instructions of an angel in Joseph's dream. They believed that God would not abandon them, that God would be with them as they sought safety and security for their son, for Jesus.

I like to imagine that Joseph and Mary found a welcoming village to begin their life with their son. I like to imagine that there were children, some of them toddlers. I like to imagine that the mothers welcomed Mary and invited her to bring Jesus over to play. I like to imagine that the women shared local recipes with Mary and she shared some she knew with them. I like to imagine that Joseph was able to find a carpenter to work with – maybe as an assistant at first, but as that stranger saw his talent, he gave Joseph jobs that were more detailed or complex. I like to imagine the toddler, Jesus, falling down as he learned to walk the village children helped him to get back up; all of them laughing as they played together. I like to imagine that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph became beloved members of that community for as long as they were there.

I imagine that as Jesus grew up, after they had settled in Nazareth, Mary would share stories of their time in Egypt with him – stories of the extravagant welcome they received in this foreign land from people who could have been their enemies

or could have turned them away. Stories of how they were fed, sheltered, supported and loved. I imagine that Mary's stories of their time as refugees shaped Jesus as an adult. They could have influenced how Jesus interacted with Gentiles, Samaritans, a Syrophonecian woman, a Roman officer, so many people.

Dr. Christine J. Hong, in her description in our devotional of her experience of growing up as a first generation Korean – American immigrant, shared the good fortune of having people who cared for her like family. She called them aunt and uncle, even though they were not relatives. Rather they were church members or neighborhood friends who took her family under their wings. They shared a cultural heritage and they shared love.

Dr. Hong shares her gratitude for those beloved persons in her life and similar persons in Jesus' life. She says, "I give thanks for all my great aunts and great uncles via war and displacement, for all the Korean American church aunts and uncles who raised me, and for the aunts and uncles in Jesus' life those thousands of years ago. I give thanks for the strangers who became friends and family through solidarity with the Holy Family, wanting a better world, not only for themselves, but for a refugee family too."

In the midst of violence and injustice of Jesus' world, an angel warned Joseph to flee to Egypt and become refugees. In our bulletin cover, an angel protected them on their journey. But I believe there were also angels in the village where they landed. These angels were ordinary people who welcomed, supported and cared for Joseph, Mary, and Jesus as they were refugees in their land.

Similarly, Dr. Christine Hong was blessed to grow up with angels, members of her church and neighborhood that shared her Korean culture. They welcomed, supported, and loved her family and eased their transition into our country.

Angels are all around us. I have met some, those who work with IRIS – Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services from New Haven, CT. I met their director, Chris George, as a student at Yale Divinity School. Chris explained that refugees are men, women and children who fled their countries of origin due to persecution on the basis of their race, nationality, religious belief, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. He explained that his staff is very small. But he emphasized that resettlement work requires a community – volunteers from churches, synagogues, mosques, and other organizations. The

volunteers help the family with housing and furniture, food, clothing, and learning English. They also help them access job training and placement, health care, school and tutoring, and assistance with legal matters. Chris emphasized that it's amazing work to help a persecuted family start a new life and that these families contribute to the vitality of Connecticut's communities.

At one of IRIS programs, I met a refugee family. While IRIS's clients have come from Syria, Afghanistan, Congo, Cuba, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Sudan and other countries, this family a mother and father, two daughters and a son had come here from Jordan. They shared their story and their gratitude for all who had supported them here. And the young mother in that family had even opened a bakery where some of the cookies were from recipes from her homeland. They have become part of their new community.

And within the SNEUCC, working with the Immigration, Refugee and Asylum Task Team, some Connecticut and Massachusetts UCC churches have worked with Episcopal, Catholic, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches, synagogues and mosques. They have helped settle families from the countries like Congo, Ivory Coast, and a number of families from Afghanistan. While the refugee families have benefited, the congregations have benefited by learning about different cultures and religions. According to the pastor in UCC church in Longmeadow, MA, "most of the active volunteers have fallen in love with the family, admiring their courage, resilience, and faith."

Joseph, Mary, and Jesus became refugees. In Joseph's dream, an angel told him to flee. Guided by an angel, Joseph had to choose between the risk to his son's life and the risk of what he had been passed down through the generations of life for the Israelites – oppression of Jewish people in Egypt. Joseph chose to go to Egypt. Joseph chose to listen to God, to trust his faith and trust strangers, and to live in hope. Jesus grew up in that faith, trust and hope. It was part of Jesus' story.

It's a story that is not unlike the story of refugees to day.

