

Christmas II C 2010

Texts: Jeremiah 31:7-14

Psalm 84

Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

“Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt.” Matt 2:14

**Today the lectionary provided a choice of three gospel stories. I could have read Luke Chapter 2, which is the story of Jesus staying back in the temple, and his parents looking furiously for him when they realize he is not with them on their way back home from the Passover celebrations in Jerusalem.**

**Or I could have read from the first part of Chapter 2 in Matthew, which is the story of the Magi coming to visit Jesus. The last gospel choice is the last half of Matthew Chapter 2 and it is the story of the Holy Family’s flight into Egypt.**

**I chose to read the flight into Egypt because it is something that isn’t preached on very often and yet I believe this story has profound implications for our faith and how we understand the Christmas season. I chose to read this particular gospel story because in the middle of our joy, in the middle of our celebrations of Jesus’ birth, in the middle of our singing “Joy to the World,” God rather suddenly pulls the rug out from under us and makes us face the harsh reality of our world.**

**Let’s look at what has happened since Christmas. December 25<sup>th</sup> we are excited, we can’t believe how fortunate we are to have a God that has come to be among us, to live as one of us. December 28<sup>th</sup>, a mere three days later, we are asked to commemorate the Holy Innocents...those children murdered at the hand of Herod the Great because a new king was born and was a threat to his power. And today we read about Mary and Joseph fleeing for their lives. Today we hear of Joseph and Mary leaving everything they know to hide from a tyrant and to insure the life of their son.**

**In the span of a mere nine days we go from celebration to murder to leaving Israel in the middle of the night. In a mere nine days we go from worshipping a newborn king to worshipping a refugee. Think**

**about that for a minute. Our Lord is a refugee. It usually isn't the first thing we think of at Christmas...or any other time really.**

**We are much more comfortable with cute babies and cherubs and angels singing from on high and worshipping royalty. We are much more comfortable with the image of Jesus as King than we are with Jesus as refugee.**

**But if we are to understand Jesus as King we must first understand him as refugee. If we are to claim Jesus as divine, we must first claim Jesus as human and as subject to the very real threats and conditions humans find themselves in.**

**But this story of fleeing so that a family's life may be saved, is not some story of 2000 years ago. This story is not some tableau frozen in time, but a mirror showing us what continues today.**

**According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees there are tens of millions, tens of millions of people, God's people, who are currently refugees or displaced persons. As of 2008 the U.N. estimates that 15.2 million people are refugees who have fled their native countries due to war, internal strife, lack of safety in politically or religiously challenging the status quo, or because of a severe lack of natural resources. That number, 15.2 million, is higher by four million people than the year before.**

**The number of people who are internally displaced, those that remain in their country of origin but are forced to move, may be as high as 42 Million. In countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Zimbabwe, Congo, Darfur, Sudan, North Korea, and China millions of people are threatened with death every day.**

**What's more the New York Times reported just yesterday that those with religious or political differences who have fled to neighboring countries seeking asylum are being forcibly returned at a very high rate despite international protest. These refugees are being used as bargaining chips by those countries that are returning them to the national authorities after being given millions of dollars of aid. And most of the time those returned are never heard from again.**

**The U.N.'s 2008 report concludes that the world is becoming more and more an inhospitable place for refugees.**

**What would have happened had Egypt decided not to allow the Holy Family to enter? What would have happened had Galilee made a deal with Herod's son, Archelaus, to return Joseph and Mary and Jesus to Judea in exchange for economic aid?**

**We can never know, as privileged Americans, what it is to live in a refugee camp with thousands and sometimes hundreds of thousands of others, with little food, no sanitation or medical care. But think for a minute how those in the camps may experience the story of the flight into Egypt.**

**Can you imagine what it is like to come to the realization that God does know what it is like to leave everything behind? Can you imagine coming to the understanding that God does know what it is like to depend on others for survival? How shocking it must be to understand at a visceral level that God does know that it is like to live daily under the threat of death, that God does know what it is like to live in a country where there is little to no governance or rule of law, where looking different, thinking different or worshipping different is a reason to kill entire families. What a shock it must be and what a comfort to really know that God understands because God has been and is one of us; that God is a refugee.**

**We have the stories of the murder of the innocents and the flight into Egypt so soon after Christmas so that we don't over-sentimentalize the season. God tells us to rejoice in being given his Son, but to look deeply at the world he was sent to save. God wants us to rejoice, but God also wants us to remember...remember those who are living under persecution and oppression every day.**

**The murder of the innocents and the flight into Egypt are gory and gruesome stories. But they are necessary stories and at their very core they are hopeful stories.**

**They are hopeful because from the very beginning God in Christ has entered into the world's suffering and pain. From the very beginning**

**God is showing us that no governor or government, no Politburo or political process can thwart God's plan for salvation and reconciliation.**

**God's message in these stories is that Herods come and Herods go. Governments rise and governments fall. What is need not continue into what will be.**

**God's promise to the world is that through all the horror there is hope. God's promise to us is that God in Christ can and will make things different. And God asks us to help him do just that.**

**Amen.**