



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church

Asheville, North Carolina

29 December 2019

Sermon: "In Search of Home"

Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block

Psalm 148

Matthew 2:13-23

We will read Matthew 2:13-23 in parts, followed by singing a stanza from Hymn 154:

Now after the wise men 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."

~

Let's sing together the first stanza of our hymn:

*"Jesus entered Egypt fleeing Herod's hand,
living as an alien in a foreign land.
Far from home and country with his family,
was there room and welcome for this refugee?"*

~

Bethlehem is awake!
As the sun rises, the wise men climb atop their camels.
The Shepherds lead their sheep over the hill.
The cattle graze outside of the barn.
The holy night sky has shifted to a pale blue.
The bright stars are now invisible to the human eye.
The newborn feeds on his mother's breast.
And the angels sing a morning song.
All is calm and *bright*.

Then, Joseph awakens in a pool of sweat from a dream
so raw and rattling that it calls him to action.

He looks over at his family – vulnerable, now in grave danger.
There is no place to hide under the harsh light of day.
Mary begs for them to stay just one more night or two.
The baby is only a few hours old; he is too small to take a journey.

She is still healing herself.
But Joseph sees no other choice.

He quickly gathers their belongings,
and when the moon reclaims the sky,
he helps Mary atop the weary donkey.
She holds her baby close.

Joseph tugs at the rope and they are off.

Refugees on the move...

heading down a curvy, unknown path that spans nearly 430 miles to Egypt.

There is no telling what they will face:
they could be attacked, separated, even killed.
Will there be room for them in that foreign land?

There is no time to wonder or worry,
no time to even look back to catch one more glimpse
of that little town of Bethlehem – the place where it all began,
a place that now feels like a lifetime away.

~

I don't know about you, but I have so many follow up questions for God.

God could have entered into this world as anyone, as anything,
A powerful emperor, a 300 year old tree, a general ruling an army...*why not?*

Instead God enters this world as a refugee.
A destitute infant, without agency, without a home,
with nothing but his father's dreams and his mother's arms to keep him safe.

I wonder...what happened when the holy family arrived in Egypt...
Were they kept at the border? Were they separated and questioned?
Were they treated as fellow human beings or were they cruelly labeled as "aliens?"
What response did Joseph get as he began searching for work?
What looks did Mary get as she shopped in the market?
Did Jesus feel safe at night, or did laying between his parents feel like a shield of protection from
the cruelty of the world that he could already feel?

Jesus's time is not far from us...
We know from the events and rhetoric of this year
that the powerful are still quick to react out of fear or selfishness,
and to be a refugee still means to be despised, dismissed, dehumanized.

So why does God choose to enter into the world like this?
What are we supposed to see, understand and feel?
How is our faith meant to be shaken?
Are we to fear a baby in need?

Or are we to lift to him up and call him Emmanuel – God with us?

~

Scripture continues...

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."

~

We sing together stanza two:

***"Jesus was a migrant living as a guest,
with the friends and strangers who could offer rest.
Do we hold wealth lightly, so that we can share
shelter with the homeless, and abundant care"***

~

"I'm gonna be free or die," Harriet proclaims to as she stands at the edge of a bridge ready to throw herself over into a swiftly flowing river before she can be apprehended.ⁱ

Harriet Tubman was born in 1822 in Maryland. Her given name was Araminta Ross. As an enslaved person in America, she spent her days being forced to work on a plantation. She survived years of beatings, as well as the constant threat of being sold away from her husband and family.

As a child, she suffered a traumatic head wound when a slave owner threw a heavy metal weight intending to hit another enslaved person, but instead it hit her. For the rest of her life, she experienced strange visions, dizziness and vivid dreams. It was in these moments that she heard the voice of God clearly and felt God leading her onward.

Harriet said: "Slavery is the next thing to hell. I grew up like a neglected weed, ignorant of liberty, having no experience of it."

Without being able to read a single sign, with only the stars, daring abolitionists, and her strong faith in God's voice to guide her way, she successfully escaped north – running nearly ninety miles to freedom.

"I had crossed the line. I was free." She said, "but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land."

She gave herself a new name Harriet Tubman, but she would come to be known by many as “Black Moses,” because she returned down south nineteen more times in order to guide nearly three hundred people – including her own family – to freedom.

During the Civil War, she became a spy for the Union army and was the first woman to ever lead an armed military operation in the United States.ⁱⁱ

Born a stranger in a strange land that *should* have been her own -
Harriet trusted in the God of her visions and dreams
to point her and others towards freedom and safety,
with the *same* faith Joseph clung to in the first chapter of Jesus’ life.

~

We don’t talk much about dreams or visions these days.
We tend to intellectualize them or brush them aside.
We like our faith to have walls and committees and logical formulas.
But what if God is still shouting out in mysterious ways?

Surely God has much to say to us about the year we have had.
Surely God has much to say about the millions of innocents whose lives have been lost
to gun violence, domestic violence and war.
Surely God has much to say about caged children and a crippling climate.
Surely God has much to say about those who hate and hide
behind party lines, religious lines, or behind our own comfort or feelings of entitlement.
Surely God is speaking, and weeping, and shaking us awake.
What will it take for us to listen, trust and courageously follow?

~

Scripture says:

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."

~

We sing together:

*Jesus crosses borders with the wandering poor,
searching for a refugee, for an open door.
Do our words and actions answer Jesus’ plea:
“Give the lowly welcome, and you welcome me?”*

~

“Where are you from?”

This is a question that people of color are asked again and again by white folks here in this country... *where are you from?*

It is familiar and painful question because even without malintent, below the surface it carries with it the implication that something about our shade of skin, or the texture of our hair, or the shape of our eyes, says we are separate from this place – *strangers in a strange land.*

The question (when asked) is not looking for answers like, “I’m from Boston, or Charlotte, or Chattanooga, Tennessee.”

“Where are you from, *really?*” Is always the jolly follow-up.

“Oh, where am I from *really?* You mean where are my ancestors from? Well let’s see... And then we ask the same question back: “How about you, where are you from?”

The answer: “Oh me? I am just American.”

~

Bethlehem can feel so far away.
We can forget about the place where it all began:
the places where they fled,
the circumstances that they feared,
the decisions that spared them,
the salvific gift of finding *home.*

What makes us forget the truth about our stories? About Jesus’ story?

We mold Jesus into something sweet, and comfortable and fair.

We strip him of his refugee status, of his dark skin,
of his infant cries and vulnerability.
And we do it to our own stories.

We forget the truth about who *we* are:
the struggles that run through our veins,
the desperation, resilience, guilt, pain, and yearning for hope.
The names and the stories.

How do we remember that the world Jesus was born into (power-hungry and corrupt),
is not all-different from the world we are trudging through today?

~

So, where are you from, really?
What is your story – the story of your ancestors?
Did they travel to America to escape something or to seek something?
Were they brought here by force – kidnapped and in chains?

Did some take a long boat trip and have to lie in order to be welcomed in?
Did some outstay their visa?

Did some come ready to work or get medical care?
Or were they here long before people on ships ever came?

Take a moment – turn to someone near you.
Maybe someone you know or someone you are about to know.
Introduce yourself and in just a few sentences share,
where your family is from, and if you know,
share the circumstances that brought them to this land, or that brought you to this land.

And if you don't know...then share the story of how you or your family chose to come to this
city of Asheville – where many come seeking refuge.

(People turn and share with one another)

~

Friends, we are people of different stories and people of the same story.
In the coming year, as we seek to move forward and make positive change,
let's retrace our steps back to Bethlehem...
During a time ripe with danger and chaos,
a baby was born and laid in a manger.
And before he could even open his eyes,
he was lifted up, fleeing for his life,
desperately seeking liberation, everlasting peace,
and hope in the midst of impossible circumstances.
He found that and shared that – beyond borders and boundaries.

And this *same* God of hope calls out to us today - in mysterious, wonderous ways,
demanding that we remember what it means to run alongside Him;
to demand freedom, work for justice, dismantle systems of oppression,
risk everything to liberate the most vulnerable among us,
and be beacons of radical love in this aching world.

Siblings in Christ, here at this table,
we gather around the *truth* of our story.
And we gather alongside a refugee God: vulnerable and mighty
running and reaching out to us *today*,
offering us a place to call home,
and a place to transform for the better.

ⁱ *Harriet*. Dir. Kasi Lemmons. Focus Features. September 10, 2019

ⁱⁱ <https://www.biography.com/activist/harriet-tubman>. Nov 4, 2019