

A place of sanctuary!

Psalm 148; Matthew 2:13-23

Our faith can protect us, provide safety and care for us both literally and metaphorically. On Christmas Eve we live out the dream of the perfect Christmas it is a romantic version of a birth of the most holy child. In that we do not hear Mary giving birth, we do not hear the panic in Joseph's voice, and we do not hear Jesus cry or take his first breath. What we do here are the Angels singing in great thanksgiving to God. We hear the shepherds in silent awe when they find the child wrapped in cloth lying in a manger and we hear the prophecy brought to life. But what happens when the shepherds go back to work tending the sheep in the fields? What happens when Mary collapses from exhaustion? What happens when she can't console Jesus who continually cries? What happens when they still can't find a place to stay except among the animals who we know would be very hungry? What happens the next morning when the sun comes up and they too are hungry? What happens when they feel the weight of the fact that they're on their own an isolated comes down upon them?

The Gospel of Matthew tells of how God appears to Joseph in a dream warning him of what is to come. King Herod was on a mission to hunt down this child and destroy him because he fears for what this child is capable of. So, today we hear the rest of the Christmas story, the one so many skip to get to epiphany; the story where King Herod awoke to some wise people coming into his palace asking where the child was the one who would be born King of the Jews. The wise men saw a star and came to pay him homage. The story begins with a seemingly innocent request from Herod to the wise people to go and search for this child and when they found him King Herod requested that they come back and let him know where this precious child was so that he too could go and pay homage. The wise people did follow the star they did find Jesus and when they did they knelt down before him and paid him homage and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh then they too were warned in a dream not to return to Herod and so they took a different road back to their home.

This gets us caught up to the story today, of the dreams of warning that Joseph had. God warned Joseph in a dream to take Mary and Jesus and go to a far away land, to the land of Egypt so that Herod could not harm Jesus. Jesus started his life as a refugee. Luckily for Jesus, Joseph believed; Joseph headed God's message and Joseph did as God asked of him. Perhaps this time it was easier for Joseph to believe. For according to Matthew Joseph had received another message in a dream that had told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife for she was carrying God's

beloved child. Perhaps Joseph found the strength to take his new wife and child to Egypt because the alternatives were too horrible to comprehend and perhaps it was his survival instinct that kicked in. They had already left everything that they had and who they knew to come to Bethlehem to be counted so really this was no different. Perhaps after Jesus birth Joseph knew what truly mattered and he was not afraid because he had found love; the love of a partner, the love of a child, the love of God who would protect them always. This is a story of exile which will bring freedom to all of us.

Matthew's account of the beginning of Jesus life echoes of story of Moses. God protected the chosen people as they flee from the hands of a tyrant; the tyrant in total fear of losing power and control and status believes the only solution was to kill children in the area who were under two. But like the story of Moses, this doesn't work and through the help and love and care of God, higher purpose and the radical hospitality of strangers are what provide us with this beautiful story. The sacrifice of others to achieve this higher purpose was what happened instead, and freedom will be found. Perhaps the early years of Jesus life prepared him for his ministry where he would call the disciples to leave everything behind and trust and rely on the hospitality of others.

This type of story is retold over and over again today in the secular world. The first story that came to mind for me after reading the scriptures was the movie series 'The Matrix' where a band of rebels move against the matrix, believe in the chosen one, whose name is Neo; Neo, meaning new birth, new beginnings. Now there's no reason to believe that this person is the chosen one, but they have faith. They believe the prophecy and they believe this man to be the chosen one. The most recent version of this story is found in a new TV series on the Disney channel called the Mandalorian which is a part of the Star Wars saga. In this story a bounty hunter is asked to find an infant being that is being hunted down because of the power it possesses. The Empire wants it badly, but during this journey there is a resistance. People believe in what this infant can bring and how this infant being can change their world. There's also a movement of resistance in the United States that started this Christmas. Have you seen the picture of the Nativity where Mary is in a cage, Joseph is in a cage, and baby Jesus in a cage, separated from each other? This is in response to how children are being torn away from their families as they come to the USA seeking refuge. We as a church have sponsored refugees over the years. How do we welcome people who have had to flee their homes and truly make this new country a home for them? What does radical hospitality look like in today's world? Can people rely on us in the same way that Joseph and Mary did on the people on their journey to Egypt? How do we imagine a world where instead of having to flee the refugee family would find itself at last welcome and secure?

There is nothing sentimental about Matthew's Christmas story. This story is set in a time of violence in our world history. Matthew calls all who observed Jesus birth to remove their hope, to believe in God. So many people made sacrifices to ensure that Jesus would bring good news to the world and yet these violent forces at his birth foreshadow the violence that will eventually lead to his crucifixion where he will then make the ultimate sacrifice for us to bring peace to this

earth. But until that time, we need to trust, we need to trust in the promise of what God offers. We need to trust in the promise that nothing can defeat God. We need to trust that nothing can separate us from God and that there is hope; honesty, even in the face of this violence God protects us. We are called to be part of the resistance. We need to rise in resistance to tyranny. We need to rise in the face of oppression. We need to rise and extend sanctuary to all who are lost and alone, all who have lived in exile, both physical and mental. Radical hospitality means that this church and these resources are accessible to all people. That is what we are being called to do; to reach out to provide sanctuary and refuge to all people as was done for Jesus at the time of his birth and for this we give God thanks. Amen.