

Christmas 1A, January 1, 2017, Matthew 2:13-23, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA,
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Several weeks ago, when I was looking ahead to the scripture readings appointed for upcoming Sundays, the gospel reading for today jumped out at me. I had already begun to think beyond our late Advent and Christmas Eve and Day services towards this Sunday and about how these readings might apply to our situation today. And then life happens, and you must deal with things that you weren't planning on, and other things get left behind. My father's illness and then his death this past week and funeral yesterday were the necessary and important events that took precedence over reflecting on the texts and developing a sermon. Still, I did take a few moments, asking the Spirit's guidance what might be said in a relatively short period of time.

You may have seen these signs popping up in front yards and attached to porches and railings on homes. I've noticed quite a few over the last several weeks here in their neighborhood of the church. It's a simple sign. Yet powerful in its message. It says, "No matter where you are from we are glad you are our neighbor." It's written in three languages; Spanish, English, and Arabic. A Mennonite Church in Harrisonburg, Virginia created the sign and they have now quickly spread, mostly through the network of Mennonite Churches, but now also among other churches and people who don't consider themselves particularly religious. The signs were created during a rise in anti-refugee and anti-immigrant sentiments which had led to a couple of ugly incidents in which refugees were harassed. The church wanted these new neighbors to know that not everyone believed nor acted that way. The response has been largely positive. Immigrants and refugees have stopped by the homes of people displaying the signs and telling them how grateful they are for the gracious showing of support.

It seems particularly relevant to bring this up today because our gospel reading reminds us that Jesus and his family, Joseph and Mary, were themselves refugees. Like Syrians today, or Bhutanese a few years ago, or Bosnians or Vietnamese a decade or more ago, Jesus had to flee his home because of danger and persecution. He was born into a world in which tyrants don't care if children live or die, if their homes are searched and destroyed, if they are snatched from their parents' arms.

How many of us have ever contemplated what it must be like to flee your home in a time of grave danger, with nothing but the clothes on your back and what you can quickly stuff into a bag? How does it feel to arrive in a strange land, not speaking the language, stared at because you look different, your skin is different, you practice a different religion? Is that the way Joseph and Mary felt as they arrived in Egypt; alone, afraid, stared at, unwelcome?

I can't help but wonder if these early experiences of the infant and growing Jesus didn't help shape his ministry as an adult. As he himself experienced being an outcast, sensing the fear in his parent's voices as they fled the danger of the powerful who sought to destroy them, could that have led Jesus himself to seek out those who lived on the margins? The welcome he gave to those that others tried to push aside; the poor, the diseased, those possessed by demons, those of different faiths or culture, could very easily have been forged in those earliest days of fear and flight.

This story of Jesus and his family fleeing as refugees to a foreign land so soon after his birth reminds us that the Christmas story is wonderfully complex, and deeply human. The lights of Christmas are already beginning to fade as we start to pack away our decorations. So the question becomes, how will you continue to reflect the light that has come into the world that shines in darkness? Is it by putting up a sign in your front yard signaling your welcome of those who are fled their homes in fear? Maybe as a companion to someone who sits in the darkness of their own loneliness or by packing food at the Council of Churches Food Hub, or serving a community meal. Or maybe taking the courageous step and volunteering to help a refugee family make a new home in a strange and foreign land?

Any of these examples, and countless others, are ways Jesus' light continues to shine through us. The season of Christmas may be coming to an end, but the light of Christ will still shine into those dark and lonely places. Through you. Through us. Amen.