***A REFUGEE IN OUR MIDST***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

January 1, 2017

Texts: Isaiah 63:7-9 and Matthew 2:13-23

It is the dawn of a new year! Christmas has come and gone with the arrival of Jesus in Bethlehem and the parade of shepherds to the manger, and while the arrival of the wise men is officially not celebrated until the end of this week, most of them have been packed away with the Christmas crèches as well. The remarkable year of 2016 has been rehashed, reviewed and at times reviled with some glad to see it go and others wishing it could last a little longer.

The dawning of the new year brings with it new hopes, new anxieties, and new New Year’s resolutions – commitments to be a better version of last year’s you. For some that involves a new health club membership where the workout room is always immensely crowded for about two weeks. For others it is a diet to lose the ten pounds that mysteriously appeared over the holidays. For some it is a new hobby or a new routine or kicking an old habit. The turning of the page on the calendar offers the opportunity for a fresh start? What, if anything, is fresh and new at the turn of this new year?

What was new in that new year after the first Christmas was the incarnate presence of God on earth. Jesus’ birth marked God’s presence among us in a way that the world had never known before, a unique event in the history of the world, yet most of the people were oblivious to God’s presence among us. After the angels departed from sharing their tidings of great joy over the shepherds’ fields and the shepherds returned to their sheep and the wise men went back home – by another way as the dream suggested – life for Mary, Joseph and the baby seemed to be returning to the new normal of a family with a newborn child. But that did not last long, for while most people had been oblivious to the child’s birth, King Herod had taken note and felt threatened. It is perhaps the measure of his royal insecurity that Herod felt he had to do something to stamp out the threat – even though the threat was from an infant. Thus began what is known as “the slaughter of the innocents”, the killing of all male children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under. Matthew’s commentary on that event hearkens back to the anguished words of Jeremiah:

*A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation,*

*Rachel weeping for her children;*

*she refused to be consoled because they were no more.*

Those of you who have suffered the loss of a child have a hint of their pain, magnified by the senseless violence by which the children died. The new thing in that new year after Jesus was born was that children died to satisfy a king’s paranoia and the parents of young children around Bethlehem wailed in grief for the slaughter of their children! How awful it must have been for those children and for their parents and for God! For what God intended to be tidings of great joy resulted in moments of great anguish. God may have been doing a new thing in coming among us in Jesus, but Herod’s paranoid presence on the throne was an old thing that carried over into the new year with deadly consequences.

Not everything was new in the new year after Jesus’ birth. Some of the old things carried over and some of those were not good. Suffering did not suddenly abate. The birth of the Prince of Peace did not begin a new era of unsurpassed harmony. Out from the glow of that first Christmas night, away from the startling appearance of the wise men on bended knee with their glorious gifts, the shadows of suffering still stretched out over the world – perhaps a reminder of why Jesus came in the first place, came while the Romans still ruled and Herod still reigned and people still sinned and suffered. As Fleming Rutledge reminds us:

*This Christmas and every Christmas, the Rachel passage says to us that we can’t run away from the suffering of the world. The suffering of the world is part of the story.*[[1]](#endnote-1)

Suffering is part of the story of the child’s birth in Bethlehem, and it continues to be part of the story today, 2000 years later.

This new year dawns for us with new hopes, new dreams and new commitments to be better in 2017, but for much of the world it dawns with the same old problems that plagued last year. Syria and Iraq are still a mess. Terrorists are still plotting. Global temperatures are still rising. The poor and oppressed are still poor and oppressed. Somewhere in the world a child still dies from hunger every five seconds.[[2]](#endnote-2) Racists are still spouting hateful vitriol. And refugees are still fleeing the mayhem in their own nations in search of some safe place to land. The world is still not the way God wants it to be despite the birth and death and resurrection of Jesus the messiah, but God came anyway. God came, not to guarantee that suffering would suddenly cease, but to offer us strength and hope with which to face it, endure it and overcome it. In coming to us as God did, God knows something of suffering – knows what it is to be rejected, knows what it is to be a refugee in our midst!

This past summer the United Nations refugee agency reported that the number of displaced persons reached an all-time high, surpassing even the number of refugees in World War II. At the end of last year 1 of every 113 people worldwide were displaced from their homes – some within their country; many outside of it. That was a year ago, and it has gotten worse since then. We’ve seen pictures of refugees crowded onto overloaded boats trying to cross the Mediterranean with disastrous results. We’ve seen children wash up on seashores. We’ve seen dusty refugee camps that seem to stretch on forever. We’ve seen the homes of refugees blown to smithereens. We’ve seen terrorists use the swarm of refugees across Europe for cover to further their own destructive plans. And we’ve heard harsh rhetoric that offers little compassion for the folks fleeing the violence with no place to go.

We Christians should have great sensitivity to the concerns of those refugees, for the one we call Lord and Savior was himself a refugee. You heard it from Matthew’s account this morning. Warned in a dream to flee from Bethlehem, Joseph took his wife and infant son and fled in the night to Egypt ahead of the Slaughter of the Innocents. Jesus survived Herod’s wrath only because he became a refugee. Like the infant Moses who was saved from pharaoh’s murderous rampage, the baby Jesus was saved from Herod’s threat with Joseph’s dream-inspired flight to Egypt; the Jews for whom Matthew wrote would have been quick to recognize that connection between Pharaoh’s threat to the infant Moses and Herod’s threat to Jesus. God’s hand was at work in the lives of both!

As a refugee in Egypt, Jesus was no less God among us; he was God among the homeless and the outcast and the refugees. He was God among displaced and dispirited persons. To put it in modern perspective, we would be more likely to find the infant Jesus in one of those vast refugee camps on the border of Syria than in any Sunday School class in America. God’s incarnate place among us seems to be among the poor and outcast, not the rich and powerful. Those who suffer are near and dear to the heart of God, and just as foreigners made room for Joseph and his family in Egypt, so we may be the instruments by which God ministers to refugees, to those who are outcast or oppressed by others. Our role in that ministry may be to break unjust rules to offer compassion as the midwives did who spared the lives of Hebrew children in Egypt, or it may mean welcoming to our community those who are refugees from other places as the Egyptians welcomed Joseph and his family. It may mean

standing against racism or prejudice in whatever form it rears its ugly head,

or helping teach English to those who arrive in our midst without a clue as to what we are saying,

or helping someone new to our nation and community find a job or learn new skills to support a family,

or it may mean simply being kind and compassionate to the strangers in our midst.

Not all refugees among us are from somewhere outside the borders of this nation. Some refugees have lived their whole lives in this country, perhaps within our own community, and still can find no place to be truly at home, no place to be welcomed, no place to live safely and securely.

We are called to minister to these displaced persons – whether the displacement is one of geography or community or love. We are called to minister, not as saviors, but as disciples of ***the*** savior. As Isaiah says, “It was no messenger or angel but God’s presence that saved them.” And so it is for us. We are saved by the presence of God with us – with us in a baby born in Bethlehem, with us in a savior who became a refugee in Egypt and grew to be a crucified and risen Lord. He is the one we serve, and we serve him by leaving the glow of Bethlehem’s manger and reaching out to those in need in this new year as instruments of God’s presence with them. As you go about figuring out how you want to be the new you in this new year, consider some new means of serving, some new means of loving, some new means of following the One who is the savior, Emmanuel, God with us – with us last year, this year and all years! Amen

1. Fleming Rutledge, “Monsters in the Manger”, preached at Grace Church, New York City, 1993 cited by Steve Willis in his paper for Lectio Jubilate for First Sunday After Christmas, December 30, 2007 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Statistics from freedomfromhunger.org [↑](#endnote-ref-2)