***REFUGEES***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

January 1, 2023

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

 The manger is empty now, and there are no remnants of its use as a cradle for the Son of God, no “Jesus slept here” carved into its sides to mark its sacred use that holy night. It is once again a feed trough for animals as it was intended to be. The stable no longer serves as housing and nursery for the newborn child and his family. The shepherds have returned to their fields to watch over their flocks by night without the bright songs of the angel chorus above them. But a star in the east still shines, guiding the magi on their journey of faith in search of the child born to be king of the Jews. It is one week after the birth of Jesus, and life has moved on.

 Here at Covenant the Advent wreath and candles are tucked away for another year, the Christmas tree is shedding needles, poinsettias have migrated to new homes, and the blooms have fallen off my Christmas cactus. The boiler is repaired and the Fellowship Hall renovation is almost complete, awaiting tables and chairs that have been stored for months. In town, after-Christmas sales are on at the stores, radio stations have returned to their regularly scheduled programming, calendars have been flipped to a new year, and the post office is selling Valentine stamps. It is one week after Christmas, and life has moved on.

 In Ukraine, the people are trying to weather the bitter cold in the continuing assault on their infrastructure and are preparing for the next stage in the war, while millions who have fled the war are seeking safe space among European neighbors. At our southern border a different group of refugees is desperately seeking a place to call home in overwhelming numbers, while overwhelmed communities are struggling to cope with their arrival. In Buffalo they are recovering from last week’s snow and cold, and in New York City they are cleaning up Times Square. Southwest Airlines is still looking for baggage. People are preparing New Year’s resolutions or are now day one into trying to keep those they made last evening. Football games are flooding the airwaves with bowl games while college basketball teams resume conference schedules. It is one week after Christmas, and life is moving on.

 Some of you may recall the story from World War I about that Christmas when enemy combatants came out of their trenches on Christmas day to play soccer in the contested field between them, and the sweet sound of *Silent Night* was sung across the battlefield in English, French, and German. At dawn’s early light the shooting began once again, but for one evening all was calm and bright. Such moments are the exception, not the rule. The world does not stop for Christmas, and it did not stop for Jesus when he was born in Bethlehem. Life went on, which is of course the whole point of incarnation – God did not stop time to come to us, but came within our time and space as Emmanuel, God with us. The world did not suddenly become a better or more peaceful place when he came in the night; people did not suddenly become more faithful. Most went to bed on Christmas Eve and awoke Christmas day without any hint that God was in their midst in the flesh. Life went on – uninterrupted by the events of that night – one day, two days, three days, one week after Jesus’ birth. For Jesus and his parents too life went on. And so it goes for each of us. We may leave the tree up for a few days more, play Christmas carols for another week, and eat Christmas cookies for a fortnight, but life goes on; there are places to go and things to do and people to see and dangers to avoid.

 The reading for today is a stark reminder of how abruptly life moves on from the manger. The text for today leaps over the visit of the wise men and the offering of their gifts to the newborn king and describes life in the days after the magi’s visit, life that was deadly for the young children of Bethlehem and dangerous for the holy family. The wise men had good intentions when they sought the counsel of King Herod in their search for the Christ child, but in doing so they alerted Herod to a threat to his throne. Herod was already paranoid about his power; he had killed his competitors, his wife, and three of his sons lest they plot against him. For Herod this child for whom the wise men searched was just one more threat to be extinguished. Not knowing exactly who this child was or where he lived, Herod ordered all children two years of age and under in and around Bethlehem to be put to death. Better that all should die than one threat to the throne survive! Thus began the slaughter of the innocents and the inconsolable weeping of their parents.

 How quickly life changes! One moment kings are bending at Jesus’ side and offering gifts; in the next, another king is trying to have him killed. One moment angels are singing his praises; in the next, God is warning his family to flee for their lives. One moment all is calm and bright; in the next all is dangerous and violent. Life moves on; things change. But one thing does not seem to change for the baby Jesus – the child born in a stable will be homeless once again as his family flees to Egypt to escape Herod. Jesus’ first years are spent as a refugee in a foreign land.

 God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble, says the psalmist. Those familiar words are a great comfort to people in distress, whatever the distress may be. But the words alone do not offer a refuge; God does, and God’s safe refuge for the holy family was Egypt, a place beyond Herod’s reach, a refuge revealed to Joseph in a dream. I can’t help but wonder why the parents of the other children in Bethlehem did not have such a dream to warn them to flee before Herod’s soldiers arrived. Why were they not spared? The occasions when God intervenes directly in our world are few and far between; we might prefer that God act directly more often, but for whatever reason God does not. For the most part, God acts through human agents – through you and me – as instruments of God’s justice, healing, comfort, and love. It is up to us to be God’s hands caring for the children who are refugees in our midst or at our border or in refugee camps around the world. According to Matthew, God spoke to Joseph in a dream, but it was up to Joseph to believe the dream and to gather his family and flee. Joseph was thus the instrument of God’s salvation for the baby Jesus, so that God’s plan for salvation of humankind could move forward – a plan bigger than any one child, except Jesus. And perhaps it is worth pausing to recall that while God aided Jesus’ escape from Herod, God did not intervene to save Jesus from the cross 33 years later!

 When our house burned some years ago a young girl at school asked Karen where we were going to live. “We don’t know yet,” Karen replied. “Oh!” said the girl, “you are hobos.” Hobo or refugee or simply homeless child, Jesus experienced what it is to be displaced and to have no safe place to rest his head. God understands our pain, because in Jesus, God has experienced human pain. Not only on the cross, but also in his early years as a refugee God knows what it is to be rejected. For the millions of refugees in the world today – in Ukraine and at our southern border, among those fleeing Syria and Afghanistan – there is some assurance that God understands their plight even if we don’t. We see the fleeing families and tent cities and crowded shelters that house those driven from their homes by war or violence, but we don’t really understand the challenges of day-to-day life – the dangers that lurk there, the despair that grows there, the boredom that festers there. But God understands, because God has been there and is there, for that is the promise of Emmanuel: “I am with you.“

 We are God’s instruments in ministering to those refugees. We do so through our support of ministries that offer aid to them; we do so by advocating for policies that treat refugees humanely and offer a safe haven for those seeking asylum, and by seeking to stem the violence and poverty in those places from which they were forced to flee. We do so by praying for refugees wherever they may be, for they are our brothers and sisters! We know nothing of who cared for Jesus and his family while they were refugees in Egypt. We might hope that someone took them in and offered a home for the Son of God in a foreign land – as Mike Gabel, Hugh and Connie Westfall, Roller and Jerry Shipplett, and Pam and Jim Huggins did for us after our fire. That is surely what we would have done for the refugee Jesus – wouldn’t we? Recall Jesus’ words: “Even as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me.” Does your care for refugees reflect **any** care for Jesus? Refugees live not only in foreign lands, but down the street where women seek refuge from domestic violence, at Valley Mission where families find a refuge from the cold, in shelters and churches at our border, and in homes in our community where refugees from Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Syria are trying to make a new start. In serving them we serve Christ who was a refugee like them – seeking a safe place in a world that has rejected them.

 One week after Christmas it is tempting to linger and bask in the glow of the manger, but life moves on and so must we! The glow of Christmas is a wonderful gift, but it is not a shelter from the needs of the world. Jesus came into the world in the midst of suffering, not to take it all away, but to offer us hope with which to face it day to day. He suffered in life and in death, so that we might live, not with fear, but with hope. He came for those children in Bethlehem and for their parents; he came for the children of Ukraine, Afghanistan, Venezuela, Syria, and Honduras seeking a refuge. And he came for his children at Covenant too – for you and for me. Despite the slaughter of innocents in the streets of Bethlehem, despite the suffering in the world today, despite the pain in our lives - the promise of Christmas and Calvary is still this: God is with us, always with us, here to sustain us, here to save us!

 That is the good news we proclaim – that God has come to us in Jesus Christ, the savior of the world, has come to ease our pain and suffering, to bring hope and life and peace to the streets of Bethlehem and Kyiv and Staunton alike. That is the hope in which we live, hope for more than one starry night, more than one Christmas season, hope that endures even after the glow of the manger has faded to the recesses of our hearts, hope that continues into each new year including this one. Perhaps this day, out from under the rosy glow of Christmas with the day’s headlines in our face, we may appreciate what really good news the good news of Christmas is for us and for the world, and it is this:

**Unto us is born a child who is the savior of the world, Christ the Lord!** Amen