

“Jesus, the New Moses,” FPC Marshfield, 1st Sunday after Christmas, Dec. 29, 2019

Texts: Is. 63:7-9, (Ps.148), (Heb. 2:10-18), Matt. 2:13-23

On Christmas Eve, I attended the early service, then went home for a bowl of soup and to watch the PBS Newshour, before returning for choir and the late service. There were several stories on the news about demonstrations in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, India, and other countries. The most disturbing story was about the Syrian forces' bombing in Idlib province, killing children, their parents, and other civilians. There was also a story about a man who was killed volunteering for a peace force in Syria, seeking to protect the people who have suffered through this long war. These news stories jolted me out of my nostalgic mood of Christmas Eve. It also reminded me that Jesus was born into a very dangerous world, which has not changed very much in the last 2,000 years. Empires still try to exert their power, children and families are killed, people still have to flee their homes for safety.

The birth and infancy stories in the Gospel of Matthew do not let us forget the danger into which Jesus was born. Matthew 2 begins with the story of the wise men. They came first to King Herod, who had the title “King of the Jews,” after being appointed to his position by the Romans, who occupied Palestine at that time. When the wise men inquired about a child who was born to be “King of the Jews,” Herod's fear and anger took over. That title sounded like a threat to his power, as well as to the chief priests and scribes, also appointed by Rome. When he found out that the babe was to be born in Bethlehem, he asked the wise men to let him know where the child was so he too could pay him homage. After the wise men followed the star to Bethlehem and found the child, they paid him homage and presented their gifts. They were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they bypassed Jerusalem on their way home.

Dreams are a common theme in Matthew. In Chapter 1, Joseph changed his mind and did not dismiss Mary because of her pregnancy because an angel appeared to him in a dream. After the visit of the wise men, he had another dream telling him to flee to Egypt to avoid Herod, who would be searching for the child to eliminate what he saw as a threat to his power. Herod was infuriated when he found that he had been tricked by the wise men and he sent soldiers to kill all the children in Bethlehem who were under two years old. Mary and Joseph remained in Egypt until, once again, Joseph had a dream. Herod had died and it was now thought safe to return to Israel. However, Herod's son, Archelaus, had taken his father's place in Judea, so Joseph and Mary made their home in Nazareth. Remember, in Matthew, there is no story of Mary and Joseph traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem. That is Luke's story.

There are a couple of things that are important about Matthew's Gospel, which we will be reading regularly during Year A in the lectionary. One is that Matthew tries to show that the things that happen

during Jesus' lifetime are a fulfillment of scripture. The Gospel is structured similarly to the Torah, the five books of Moses. He has five sections for the Gospel. He also tries to show how Jesus is the new Moses. In the passage for today, we are reminded about another Joseph, who was sold by his brothers into Egypt, but who had many dreams, which led him to a position of power in the Egyptian government and the ability to save his family when they came seeking food during a famine in Israel. In later generations, when the Israelites became slaves, the Egyptian rulers became threatened by the number of babies being born to the slave population. So they tried to get rid of the infants that were born. Many were saved by some midwives who feared God more than they feared Pharaoh. When Moses was born, his mother hid him for three months. When that became no longer possible, she put him in a basket, watched over by his sister, to float down the Nile. Pharaoh's daughter found him and raised him as an Egyptian. Moses' sister, Miriam offered to get her a nurse for the baby and it was his own mother. Being raised in both cultures, he was bothered as a young adult when he saw an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave. He killed him. He was then forced into exile to avoid Pharaoh's fury. So we can see many parallels between Moses and Jesus. Jesus, too, had to flee into exile, as an infant, for Herod was trying to kill the children whom he saw as a threat. Like Moses, Jesus was called to save his people from their sins, including abuse of power and authority. He set them free from slavery. Jesus stood up to authorities, both the temple leaders and the Roman overlords, and he was executed by the Romans, only to be vindicated by God by being raised from the dead.

Throughout history, empires have persecuted people, often their own. In the 1930's, after the rise of Hitler and the Nazis, persecution of those who opposed Hitler, and of all Jews, began. The Nazis went after Jewish children as well as adults. The story of Anne Frank has moved many people to see more clearly Nazi atrocities. More recently, the military of Myanmar has persecuted Rohingya Muslims, including children being snatched from their mothers' arms and slaughtered or thrown into a fire. An San Su Chi, Nobel peace prize winner, has lost a lot of her support from the international community for her refusal to stand up to the military in this situation. Thousands of children in Yemen have suffered malnutrition and been killed in bombings during the civil war there, sometimes with American bombs. In Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen, schools and hospitals have been bombed. Anywhere there is war and violence, children are likely to suffer.

According to Matthew, Jesus was a refugee. The United Nations estimates there are 66 million refugees in the world today. In the last nine years we have heard the stories of refugees fleeing from Syria, trying to get to Europe. The picture of the 3 year old boy washed up dead on the beach still haunts many of us. So many people have drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean sea from North Africa to Europe. Some are from African nations in turmoil, such as Republic of the Congo and

Nigeria. Lately there has been much political turmoil in Europe over the arrival of so many refugees. Immigration was a big issue in the vote for Brexit in the United Kingdom, and it has brought to power right wing governments opposing immigration in Romania, Hungary, and Italy. It has weakened the government in Germany, which had been welcoming to many.

In our own country, there is a big effort to stop the flow of immigration. The federal government says it will welcome only 18,000 refugees in 2020, a number far lower than have usually been admitted to the United States. Such low numbers are interfering with the refugee resettlement agencies, such as Church World Service, as they have to lay off staff and cut back on their offer to help. Again, at the southern border, we have seen children taken from their parents and held in detention in unsanitary conditions. Good records were not always kept, and some of these children have not been able to be reunited with their parents. Psychologically, all these traumatic things that happen to children are taking a big toll. Many will suffer with mental health issues for their entire lives.

The Bible, from the law of the Torah through the teachings of Jesus and Paul, encourages us to welcome the stranger. When the Sabbath is observed, foreigners are supposed to rest, as well as Israelites and their animals. Even the land gets a rest, as described in Leviticus. Every seven years the land is to lie fallow so it will not lose its productivity. Farmers are not to harvest the edges of the fields so those in need can glean from the crops that are left. Ruth, a Moabite, was gleaning in the fields of Boaz when she met him. She became the great grandmother of King David and thus an ancestor of Jesus. In Matthew 25:31-46, The Parable of the Judgment of the Nations, Jesus says that when we give food and drink, or clothing, to the least of the people we are doing it for him. At the very end of the Gospel, called the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20) Jesus says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Paul, though a Jew and a persecutor of Christians before his conversion, became the greatest apostle to the Gentiles, welcoming all into the faith. The Book of Revelation, sometimes full of violence, ends with a glorious vision of peace: In the New Jerusalem, there will be no more death, mourning, crying or pain and God will dwell with his people. There will be light in the world from the God and the Lamb. The tree of life and the river of life will nourish the people, and the kings of the earth will no longer abuse their power. (Rev. 21-22)

Though the world is full of suffering and abuse of power, God promises us a vision of hope and joy. This vision comes to us through Jesus Christ, born a babe in a dangerous world, but the bringer of salvation and love. May we carry his message with us throughout the new year. Amen.