

"ESCAPE!"

Matthew 2:13-23

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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They didn't have much time. They stuffed their few possessions into a bag and hurried out the door. She held the newborn baby close as he put his arm around them both, trying to shield them from the cold as they fled into the darkness. They knew danger was approaching, they just didn't know where and when it would appear. So they ran. Afraid. Exhausted. Refugees. Mary, Joseph, Jesus.

Perhaps Mary and Joseph thought their child would be protected from pain and suffering. He was after all, the Messiah, the Son of God. But apparently, his identity put him at greater risk. The new parents have barely had time to catch their breath; to recover from his birth; to ponder the visit from the wise men. They are on the run- to another country, another continent, to seek sanctuary in the place where their ancestors were enslaved for generations. So many unexpected things had happened to Joseph and Mary in the past nine months, but this was the most frightening. The life of their son was at risk. So they fled.

We have barely had time to catch our breath from our Christmas celebrations of less than a week ago. Was it just Monday night that we gathered in this place to hear the story of Jesus's birth? To watch our adorable shepherds welcome the precious baby? To light our candles in the darkness? To sing "Joy to the world?"

And now we hear the next chapter in the story- abrupt. Jarring. Harrowing. Dangerous. Not at all what we want to hear. Instead of the songs of angels we hear panicked whispers. And before long—we will hear the screams of inconsolable mothers weeping for their lost children. This part of the story is disturbing and unfortunately, it is also quite realistic. How many places in our world today are parents trying desperately to keep their children safe?

How many must flee into the unknown so that their children may live? How many watch their babies starve to death knowing there is absolutely nothing they can do to save them? Sadly, this chapter of Jesus's life is not far-fetched at all. It is the reality for far too many.

What must it feel like for those parents to hear about the threat against Jesus? What must they think when they picture Mary and Joseph fleeing in the night?

In 1966 Thomas Merton wrote these words: *"Into this world, this demented inn in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ comes uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it, because he is out of place in it, and yet he must be in it, his place is with the others for whom there is no room. His place is with those who do not belong, those who are rejected by power, because they are regarded as weak; those who are discredited; who are denied status as persons, who are tortured, bombed, exterminated.*

With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in this world."

So how did we get here? How did we move so quickly from the celebration of the birth of a miraculous baby to the reality of refugees fleeing in terror?

It was fear. Fear is what started it all.

Those who had absolutely nothing to lose were thrilled when Jesus was born. Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, even the angels. They had nothing to lose and so much to gain by his arrival. And the wise men, the non-Jewish foreigners who traveled so far and so long to find him- they had nothing to lose either. But I will tell you who **did** have something to lose- Herod the king and the religious leaders- all of those whose power was not rooted in God but in their own arrogant and greedy selves. All those whose power was rooted in violence, anger, competition, and fear- they had a great deal to lose. And that made them very weak indeed. And very, very dangerous.

Kathleen Norris wrote this about Herod in 1998: *"I am fascinated by the gospel depictions of King Herod: everything he does, he does out of fear. Fear can be a useful defense mechanism, but when a person is always on the defensive, like Herod, it becomes debilitating and self-defeating. To me, Herod symbolizes the terrible destruction that fearful people leave in their wake if their fear is unacknowledged, if they have power but can only use it in furtive, pathetic, and futile attempts at self-preservation."* (1)

Although he was the king, Herod was afraid of everyone. He was afraid of the Roman Empire which had installed him as king and could just as easily remove him. He was afraid of his subjects, fearful that they would try to challenge his power and overthrow him. He was even afraid of his own family- killing his wife and son when he suspected that they were plotting against him. Herod knew that he was universally hated, so near the end of his life, he commanded that at his death all political prisoners were to be executed so that there would be great mourning throughout the land. He was a despicable human being.

When the strange travelers arrived at his palace asking for directions to the nursery of the newborn king, Herod must had a fit! A **new** King? He was the king! The only king! His fear led him to try to trick his visitors and when that didn't work it sent him on a murderous rampage through the little town of Bethlehem.

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he Gospel of Matthew does not allow the Christmas story to become sentimental. It is set in the turbulence and terror of a violent history. It isn't an easy story to tell children. "You see kids, Jesus was born and the wise men brought gifts and then they had to sneak out of town so that the king wouldn't get mad at them. But the king did get mad. He got so mad that he killed all the baby boys in town. But Jesus and his parents escaped because Joseph had a dream and they became refugees and hid in another country." How is that for a Christmas pageant?

Matthew does not sugar coat the world into which Jesus was born. Matthew dares to see the world as it is, in its sorry state and yet he still affirms that God is working in that particular world at that particular time. Into the world of the

violent King Herod came the Prince of Peace. Into the world impressed with its own reflection in the mirror came the One who reflected the grace and glory of God.

And isn't that the world in which we live? The humble identity of the Savior still unsettles the arrogant insecurity of our modern day King Herods. *"And that is at the heart of Matthew's story of Jesus' birth- the promise that it is precisely this world that God came to, this people so mastered by fear that we often do the unthinkable to each other and ourselves- the ones that God so loves."* (David Lose)

David Lose explains that Matthew tells the story in this way to let us know that in Jesus, Emmanuel, God did indeed draw near to us, took on our lot and our life, and experienced and endured all that we did- disappointment, fear, violence, even death. All so that we would know that we are not alone- that we do not suffer alone, fear alone, live and die alone.

Lose says that sometimes life is beautiful and wonderful and filled with goodness and grace. And God is a part of that, giving blessing and celebrating with us and for us. And sometimes life is hard, gritty, disappointing, and filled with heartache. And God is part of that as well, holding on to us, comforting us, blessing us with promise that God will stay with us through the good and the bad, drawing us ever more deeply into God's loving embrace and promising that nothing- not even death- will separate us from that love.

Even when Joseph thought it was time to go home it really wasn't time to go home. After Herod died his equally fearful and dangerous son was the ruler of Judea so Joseph took Mary and Jesus and they made a new home in Galilee. And that is where Jesus lived until it was time for him to confront the fearful and corrupt powers of the world with God's words of grace, mercy, and love.

Our world is a terrible and wonderful place. Every day we see people doing the absolute worst and the absolute best you can do to other people and to God's created world. Every day people leave their homes, hold their children close, and undertake a dangerous journey into the unknown, hoping they will be welcomed.

It is into this world that Jesus came and still comes today. **This** world. And to **us**. Weak, selfish, violent, vulnerable, afraid, and full of fear. God's radical grace is wondrously frightening. And the good news is that there are still those who recognize the face of God when they see it.

- Those who welcome refugees with hugs, warm clothing, and hope
- Those who shelter unaccompanied children
- Those who unmask the Herods of this world and stand up to tyrants of all shapes and sizes
- Those who tear down walls instead of building them up
- Those who recognize that baby Jesus was saved from the wrath of a petty, frightened little man only because his family was allowed to cross a border.

Two poems to leave you with—The first by Warsan Shire, "Home." (edited)

No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark

You only run for the border when you see the whole city running as well

Your neighbors running faster than you

Breath bloody in their throats

The boy you went to school with

who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory is holding a gun

bigger than his body

you only leave home when home won't let you stay.

No one leaves home unless home chases you

Fire under feet

Hot blood in your belly

It's not something you ever thought of doing

Until the blade burned threats into your neck

And even then you carried the anthem under your breath
Only tearing up your passport in an airport toilet
sobbing with each mouthful of paper
made it clear that you wouldn't be going back.

You have to understand,

That no one puts their children in a boat

Unless the water is safer than the land

No one burns their palms under trains, beneath carriages

No one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck

Feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled \means something more than a
journey

No one crawls under fences

No one wants to be beaten

Pitied

No one chooses refugee camps

Or strip searches where your body is left aching

Or prison because prison is safer than a city of fire

And one prison guard in the night

Is better than a truckload of men who look like your father

No one could take it

No one could stomach it

No one skin would be tough enough

The

go home blacks

refugees

dirty immigrants

asylum seekers

sucking our country dry

they smell strange

savage

messed up their country and

now they want to mess ours up

how do the words

the dirty looks

roll off your backs

maybe because the blow is softer

than a limb torn off

or the insults are easier to swallow

than rubble

than bone than your child's body

in pieces.

I want to go home

But home is the mouth of a shark

Home is the barrel of a gun

And no one would leave home unless home chased you to the shore

Unless home told you to quicken your legs

Leave your clothes behind

Crawl through the desert

Wade through the oceans

Drown

Save

Be hunger

beg

Forget pride

Your survival is more important

No one leaves home

Until home is a sweaty voice in your ear

Saying-

Leave

Run away from me now

I don't know what I've become

But I know that anywhere

Is safer than here.

And from Jan Richardson, "A Blessing Called Sanctuary"

You hardly knew
how hungry you were
to be gathered in,

to receive the welcome
that invited you to enter
entirely—
nothing of you
found foreign or strange,
nothing of your life
that you were asked
to leave behind
or to carry in silence
or in shame.

Tentative steps
became settling in,
leaning into the blessing
that enfolded you,
taking your place
in the circle
that stunned you
with its unimagined grace.

You began to breathe again,
to move without fear,
to speak with abandon
the words you carried

in your bones,
that echoed in your being.

You learned to sing.

But the deal with this blessing
is that it will not leave you alone,
will not let you linger
in safety,
in stasis.

The time will come
when this blessing
will ask you to leave,
not because it has tired of you
but because it desires for you
to become the sanctuary
that you have found—

to speak your word
into the world,
to tell what you have heard
with your own ears,
seen with your own eyes,
known in your own heart:

that you are beloved,
precious child of God,
beautiful to behold,*
and you are welcome
and more than welcome
here. (2)

May it be so for all of God's precious children.

Amen.

End notes:

- *AMAZING GRACE: A VOCABULARY OF FAITH*, Kathleen Norris, Riverhead Books, 1998. P.225.
- *CIRCLE OF GRACE*, Jan Richardson.