

Rev. Janet Doyle
Elmer Presbyterian Church
Sunday, December 26 2021
Scripture: Psalm 46; Matthew 2: 1-23

Sermon: A Place of Refuge

Yesterday was Christmas day, the day we waited for as we walked through the Advent Season. We read our Advent devotional, had four weeks of our Advent series on "*How the Grinch Stole Christmas*." Last Sunday we had "*The Story of Christmas*" with music and scripture; we decorated our homes and bought our gifts and came together on Christmas Eve to remember and celebrate the birth of Jesus our Savior. Yesterday we opened our gifts. It is a fun day and a day we usually can spend time with family or friends and a day to relax and appreciate all that this season means to our faith.

Our scripture lesson today reminds us of another group that came to visit Jesus besides the shepherds and give gifts to Jesus. The Magi come from the East and the sign of the star guides them to the Christ Child Jesus. It wasn't the angels that announced his birth, but the star was shining brightly so they knew where to go. The Magi were kings in their own countries, people of wealth and dignity. They were mature men of wisdom. The wise men brought gifts of great value, great cost; gold, a symbol of Jesus' kingship; frankincense, a symbol of power and his deity; and myrrh, which was used for burial preparation.

The wise men knew that God was about to do something new and exciting and decided to go and see this new thing. Sometimes, to experience God you have to go and join in what God is already doing in the world and this is what the Magi wanted to do.

Whenever you make up your mind to join God's mission, there will always be someone or something, which will seek to distract you from that. There will always be something which gets in your way or someone to change your direction and plan that God has for you. Herod is that distraction for the magi. Herod will always steal, kill and destroy the purpose and plans that God has in store for you. So, who is your Herod today that is trying to distract you away from God? Remember, what is meant for evil God uses it for good.

Even after the long, difficult, diversion-filled journey, the magi weren't tired but overjoyed when they reached Jesus. When they got to the place that God had promised them, they were excited and overwhelmed. They gave their best to God and all that they had. They also listened carefully to the warning they had in a dream and did not go back to Herod and returned to their country by another route. God was still in control of the situation.

After the visit of the magi, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream to take the child and Mary, his mother, and escape to Egypt. They needed to go to a safe refuge so Herod couldn't find Jesus because he wanted to kill Jesus.

Joseph and Mary were now on a new path to get away from the evil hands of Herod. Herod was all about Earthly power. Herod was a "ruthless murderer, he had his own wife and her two brothers killed because he suspected them of treason. He was married at least nine times in order to fulfill his lusts and strengthen his political ties." (Warren Wiersbe Bible Commentary: New Testament: The King's Birth)

Herod was a non-Jew and was a descendent of the Edomites. Herod was a puppet, and he received his authority from Rome. To Herod, Jesus was a threat to his power and a potential challenger to his throne. He was fearful of this baby whom others were calling a Jewish King. He told the magi to come back and bring him word so that he might worship him also. The magi knew when they were warned in a dream that they needed to go home and not tell Herod anything about what they saw or experienced.

He was so enraged and fearful that he ordered boys two years old and under to be killed in Bethlehem and the surrounding area so that he would remain the king and the one in charge.

When the magi had departed, an angel from the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him."

Joseph, Mary and Jesus needed a place of safety, they needed a place of refuge, a place of peace. Surprisingly, Egypt was that place. Egypt holds a terrifying legacy of slavery and displacement for ancient Israel. Yet in this part of history, it acts as a refuge for Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

For the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus acts as a direct successor to Moses, and just as Moses had to be rescued from a mass killing of infants, so too did Jesus have to be rescued fleeing into Egypt. Jesus, Mary and Joseph were not the first refugees, and they are not the last. Recently we have the refugees from Afghanistan coming into our country seeking a place of peace, a place of refuge for their family and their lives.

Egypt has a very interesting history when you think that it was a place of slavery for the Israelites, and Moses brought them out of slavery. To Egypt Joseph was taken that he might escape from the death intended for him by his envious brothers and becomes a leader in Egypt and saves his family from the famine.

God sometimes sent his children into Egypt to protect them and to teach them, and he always delivered them from Egypt later. We need a place for refuge, a place where we find peace.

We are all refugees in a way. If your life has ever been disrupted and you needed a safe place to get away to; if you've ever known it was no longer safe or good for you to stay where you were or to stay the way you were; if you've ever left the known and familiar and traveled in darkness to the unknown and unfamiliar; if you've ever realized your life was at risk and you had to make a change; if your survival depended on crossing borders into a new and foreign land; if you've ever experienced these or a thousand other things like them, then you know what it's like to be a refugee. In some way or another, we all know what that's like to have to deal with a Herod in our life if not physically then emotionally or spiritually.

Being a refugee is not just about tyrant kings, oppressive governments and threats of death, it is also about a deep longing and drive for a new life and a new place of peace and security.

Some of us are refugees from a marriage or relationship that was unhealthy, destructive or violent. Some are refugees from the land of addiction. Some are refugees wandering through the darkness of depression, emptiness or a life seemingly void of meaning. Some are fleeing the countries of neglect or abuse. Many of us have recognized behaviors and choices that we had to flee or situations we just had to get away from. Most of us have probably been refugees from the land of grief and sorrow.

I am sure most of us have a refugee story at least one time in our lives when we had to get to "Egypt." Your life depended on it. You left, following

in the footsteps of the Holy Family and with each step along the way you found yourself seeking the protection and help of God.

As Psalm 46 tells us, God is our “Egypt”. “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” As we experience the stress of this world, we trust that His ways are higher than our ways, and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9) We find refuge as we trust in His power, authority, and sovereignty. This means we place our faith over our feelings as God is in control of each situation and struggle we face.

The author of Psalm 46 says we find our refuge in God by being still and knowing who He is. This means we meditate on His word, contemplate His power and authority, and mirror Jesus as we seek prayer and rest in God’s presence in our lives.

Many psalms bring out different aspects of God’s presence as a refuge. Many psalms use military imagery to describe the refuge of the Lord, including shield, stronghold, and fortress. Psalm 18 reminds us, “The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.”

Another aspect of God’s refuge is shelter under the wings of the Almighty. Psalm 36:7, “How priceless is your unfailing love! Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings.” God’s protection is a personal refuge and spreads his wings over us and shelters us. Also in Psalm 37:8 it says, “Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.” Taking refuge in the Lord brings blessings, deliverance, joy and peace, regardless of whether or not their circumstances change.

Taking refuge in God may not mean that all our troubles miraculously go away when we go to God for help. But it does mean that when we intentionally sit in the presence of God, we will find peace, rest, and strength to keep fighting the battles we face in our lives.

In this New Year of 2022 let us all take refuge in our Heavenly Father and know that Jesus came to give us life and hope, peace, joy and love and that in his arms we will find rest for our souls.

Proverbs 18:10 says, “The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.”