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“Refuge”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

First Sunday after Christmas (Year A)

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Matthew 2:1-23

You probably remember from your childhood a story

about a little bunny who tells his mother that he wants to run away.

And his mother, who is infinitely wise, responds to her little Runaway Bunny’s

strong desire to wander with her equally strong desire

to stay by his side wherever he might go.

“If you run away,” says his mother, “I will run after you. For you are *my* little bunny...

If you become a fish in a trout stream,

I will become a fisherman and fish for you...

If you become a rock on the mountain high above me,

I will become a mountain climber and I will climb where you are...

If you become a bird and fly away from me,

I will be a tree that you come to...”

and finally, “if you become a little (child) boy and run into a house,

I will become your mother and catch you in my arms and hug you.”

In other words, there is nowhere that little bunny can flee from her presence;

wherever he might go, she will be with him.

(Brown, Margaret Wise. *The Runaway Bunny*. Harper: 1942)

This story bubbled up from my subconscious as I was studying

the Jesus narrative known as the flight to Egypt.

Matthew's Gospel tells us that Jesus is the Messiah, the Spirit-child,

the one whom the prophets proclaimed Emmanuel, God with us.

And apparently God IS with Jesus because

no sooner does his star rise in the East and illumine the one who will be king,

no sooner do the Gentile astrologers arrived from afar to pay him homage,

no sooner do they swoon from overwhelmingly great joy and take a knee,

and no sooner do they shower the newborn

with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh,

than *darkness and threat* enter his life as resistance to the divine initiative.

Ironically, I am prone to say that the darkness and threat *are a validation*

of both the divine initiative and the divine presence of God with us,

in that countering forces in this world will always rise to meet

and resist the holy, until full redemption finally occurs.

Darkness and threat at this time take the form of Herod, a jealous king,

whose skin crawls at the notion that another king might be in the making,

even if the ascendancy of his rule is years in the future.

On Herod's glory cloud, there is no room for more than one King of the Jews,

and so the baby king and all potential would-be kings must go.

And the grieving mother-voice in Ramah will continue to be heard,

wailing and crying for the loss of her little ones.

How much can the life of an innocent matter anyway?

Being warned in a dream by God-with-them, this time in the form of an angel,

Joseph takes his nascent family and flees to Egypt,

and thus they become *refugees*.

Egypt, at that time, was a traditional place of refuge:

the family of a previous Joseph once fled there to escape famine;

Jeroboam, first king of the Northern Kingdom, once took refuge there;

the people of Judah took refuge there in fear of the Babylonians prior to the exile;

and Uriah, a prophet, once sheltered there, too.

The history of people seeking refuge, safety, security, and protection

is embedded deeply within our Judeo-Christian tradition.

But no one expected the boy child of Mary, the Spirit Child, the Messiah,

to be so vulnerable as to warrant geographic displacement

for political protection.

Just as no one today expects around 65 million refugee people to be swarming

the globe in unprecedented crisis in search of safety

for themselves and their children.

That number could be higher, and quite honestly, *I wish it were*.

When I see the picture of that dazed and dust-covered little boy,

obviously in shock, strapped into the seat of an ambulance

following a Syrian airstrike, I pray and hope

he has escaped that death trap as a refugee.

Or when I read the disturbing tweets of the seven year old girl, Bana Alabed,
once trapped with her mother in the bombed out shell of east Aleppo,
or the school girls and their babies, kidnapped by Boko Haram in Nigeria,
or the Yazidi women and children persecuted and held hostage
by ISIS in Iraq, I pray and hope they are among the maelstrom
of asylum seekers roving the earth.

Or when I see images of unaccompanied children, thin and threadbare,
from countries like El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras,
walking across Mexico with even younger children/babies strapped to their backs,
nearly 20,000 of them being apprehended in the US in the first half of 2016,
I am heartened that they are able to escape their home violence,
but dismayed at their tenuous hope as they enter our country.

The number of child refugees has more than doubled in the last 10 years
so that currently, children make up more than half of the world's refugees,
reports the UN International Children's Emergency Fund
(UNICEF, *Uprooted: The Growing Crisis for Refugee and Migrant Children*,
as reported in *JAMA*, November 15, 2016)

I pray and hope that God is with them, just as the mother of the runaway bunny
vows her unshakeable presence to her little runaway child.

If they rise on the wings of the dawn or settle on the far side of the sea,
if they go up to the heavens or make their little beds in Sheol,

I pray that God is with them, as God was with the endangered baby Jesus
and his family in the form of a guiding angel who sheltered them

under his protective wing.

Refuge: a place of safety or protection from enemies.

When I tried to look up poems about refuge,

I discovered that refuge is a biblical concept at core.

In the books of Numbers and Joshua, six cities were designated as cities of refuge,

where people of unintentional manslaughter might escape revenge

until their name could be cleared (Numbers 35:6, Joshua 2:12).

But it is in the poetry of the Psalms, where images of God as a refuge or shelter

for humanity proliferate: 15 of them, 1/10th of the Psalter declares

God as our rock and refuge, God as shelter for refugees under his wings,

God as refuge and fortress, God as refuge in times of trouble,

God as stronghold, shield, mighty fortress in whom we find safe lodging.

And then God, the rock-solid refuge, *risks* taking refuge him or herself

in a tiny, vulnerable, innocent human child: a refugee child of a refugee family

from day one fleeing the forces of darkness and threat.

God with us is that displaced. God with us is that migratory.

God with us is that nomadic. God with us is that transient.

God with us is that fragile. God with us is that *least of these*.

Thomas Merton once said, "With those for whom there is no room,

Christ is present in this world." (Thomas Merton, "The Time of No Room,"

Watch for the Night, p. 275)

And if God with us becomes people in a boat, tempest-tossed, yearning to breathe free,

are we not called to be fishers of people

and welcome them with generosity, care and hospitality?

And if God with us finds himself and herself being used as a human shield

on a mountain stronghold held by extremists,

are we not called to seek them out, climb to where they are,

liberate and restore them to their rightful families and lives?

And if God with us flies like a bird escaping a snare across a man-made border,

are we not called to become that mustard seed tree with room for

all birds to perch in our branches?

God is our refuge and our strength.

But God is also our refugee child, Jesus, and our weakness.

And sometimes our greatest weakness is our greatest strength.

And perhaps among the least of these is where God with us makes his home.

Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,

Our "refuge" from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.

Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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