“There is Nothing New Under the Sun, Except Resurrection”

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January 12, 2025

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

We are all beloved children of God, all humanity made in God’s image and loved by our Creator, our Parent—God.

If we were to continue with the lectionary as assigned, we would be continuing in the season of Epiphany with focus today on the baptism of Jesus. This is one of the ways in which we understand Epiphany—gradual realization, or in this case gradual revealing and recognition of Jesus’ identity and purpose. We can view the lessons we have heard this morning in the same way: Jesus is revealed to us, however, in a new way whose understanding may be equally as profound as that he is the beloved child of God. Well, indeed the same thing is true of him when he and his parents are refugees in Egypt, a baby fleeing from the brutal edicts of a tyrannical leader.

So, here is the participatory part of today’s sermon . . . The funny thing about our scripture is that we don’t know the answer to this question: How were they received in Egypt? How do you suppose they were received in Egypt? “You would think they were not received . . . Illegal immigrants!” I’m struck, wondering from later on in history, how Coptic Christians in Ethiopia knew to follow Christ. I wonder what was the message we haven’t heard transcribed. Do you remember the word from what Marsha read to us about why they landed in Nazareth? “They were still fearful” because Herod’s son, Archelaus, was still in power. They were equally afraid of him, or if not equally, surely afraid. We will talk later about what happened in their absence about what would make them afraid. I am curious, too, to know who it was that *did* receive them. I tried to do some research this week to know how long they stayed there in Egypt. Joseph, a first century historian, says that where we know that Herod died in around 3-4 CE, and Jesus is thought to have been born in 3-4 BCE, Jesus was around 8-10 years old. You may remember that in the coming weeks we will talk about his speaking in the temple at around 12-years-old. If you don’t know this story, stay tuned, because we will hear it in the weeks ahead.

So, we figure that they spent the better part of eight years in Egypt. And they were healthy, enough that they returned to become the Nazarene prophesied and his family. So, what do you imagine happened? It is certainly a different world, certainly, though crossing the desert may be the same. Looking for water and sustenance is no different. Finding food and a way to earn a living is no different. So, another question for you: What would be the *ideal* you would create? What would be their welcome when they arrived in Egypt, as depicted in so many paintings over the years, Joseph leading Mary on a donkey, infant in her arms? How would they have been received, ideally? “Part of a refugee community.” Perhaps, part of community . . . Would it have to be only refugees in the community? “That would be where they are most welcome.” “Because this is a couple with their infant, people tend to be most gracious and warm for an infant.” “They might have seen the family as new blood.” And Joseph is a carpenter, with the skills necessary for developing a refugee camp or another wider community that will welcome them.

“Would they have spoken the same language?” They wouldn’t have, verbally, though perhaps with their eyes and their gestures. This points out how difficult it would have been when they first arrived in Egypt, certainly.

So, I have another question, which you may well imagine. How would you greet them, here, today? A young couple, fleeing the edicts of a tyrannical leader, looking for safety among us. How will we greet them? “We would love it.” We would welcome them to the party. “We would welcome them in—and give them a sign-up sheet.” [much laughter ensued]. “We would maybe try to pair them with a translator so that we could communicate with them.” Anything else? “Food and shelter.” Basic needs matter. And now, I’m going to shift gears a little bit here.

Some people will do anything to get what they want, and what too many world leaders—and followers—want is power and natural resources, available only to those children of God who believe certain things, or look certain ways, or live within a certain arbitrary and artificial borderline.

The text moves from Bethlehem to Egypt and back to Nazareth with little details about what it was for Mary and Joseph to be living in exile, as refugees in a foreign land, forced there because of a threat to their child. I am sure you will not be surprised to learn that I believe we are asked, even demanded by God, to care for the refugees, the migrants, and those seeking asylum. I believe this because I believe that God’s world knows none of the barriers we humans have constructed.

Israel fears Hamas. Palestinian people fear Israelis. The people of North Sudan fear those of South Sudan (and I am not breaking into different tribes here). Those with power in Venezuela fear those who *want* power. The list goes on and one, doesn’t it? Who are *our* tyrannical leaders? Who are the innocents slaughtered by their edicts? Who will save them?

We hear in what Marsha read to us from the Gospel, “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and mourning.” Ramah is the place from which the ancient Israelites were sent into exile in Babylon and maybe we can also remember mothers crying out in El Paso, in New York, or—with four hours to spare, in Gaza City, or gathered in camps at Khan Younis. “A voice is heard weeping and mourning” from a mother, separated from her children. Who will save them. One such organization, among many including UNICEF and countless others whose names may be more familiar to you, is RAICES. *“RAICES was created in 1986 to welcome and fight for families seeking safety and freedom in the U.S. We started as a two-person team in a tiny San Antonio office and kept growing. Today, with Texas roots and national reach, we advocate for the rights and prosperity of all our families, neighbors, and community members.”* Thanks, everyone, for giving us some of this vocabulary in our earlier discussion. Neighbors, community members . . .

Much may be asked of us in the months and years ahead, when we hear of the suffering of those who are seeking relief. As we determine what we can give and what we can *risk* as we look to provide support for those who are running from situations and people who threaten their lives or their safety, we might continually remind ourselves that we have received only because God has given and continues to give. I look forward to sharing with you something of the lessons I am learning from Robin Wall Kimmerer’s beautiful book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. One element of the book that describes her overall worldview, as an indigenous American, is something we can know as the Gift Economy, in which private ownership is not really a thing. While we do live in a staunchly capitalistic society, we might learn a thing or two about sharing, and about the history of our taking without asking. How, then, shall we live? How will we respond to situations in which God’s children and God’s earth are divided and exploited for individuals’ or individual nations’ gain?

I wrote the title to this sermon long before I wrote and considered the whole, having been thinking about hope much more than I was thinking of the difficulties facing the little family with the baby born in Bethlehem and before I was thinking of the children in Gaza and separated from their parents at our own southern border. I was thinking of the passage from Ecclesiastes that proclaims there is nothing new under the sun, and I wondered what God must think of our continually slaughtering one another. What is different today is that our whole concept of death and the hereafter has been changed, such that those in the midst of extreme trial do not have to worry or grieve “as those who have no hope,” as Paul writes in his letter to the Romans. Yes, we believe that our mortal life is not the only life we will know, because Jesus has conquered death and through our faith in Him we are promised resurrection. Still, in this life, we need angels to provide warning to avoid danger, and we need to be people to bring others to safety. We need not to hoard what we have but to share it all, knowing that we do nothing apart from the love of God. Amen.