

**Flight Risk**  
 Preached by  
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 United Church of Fayetteville  
 December 30, 2018

**For reflection:** *We live in the age of the refugee, the age of the exile.* Ariel Dorfman

**Hebrew Scripture Reading:** Psalm 148

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights!  
 Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!  
 Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!  
 Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!  
 Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created.  
 He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.  
 Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,  
 fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!  
 Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!  
 Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!  
 Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!  
 Young men and women alike, old and young together!  
 Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven.  
 He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him.  
 Praise the LORD!

**Gospel Reading:** Matthew 2:13-23

Now after they [the wise men] had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. <sup>17</sup>Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

## Introduction to Sermon

Today's readings are seasonal, although not the lectionary's recommended texts for the day. Yet they seemed important to consider as nations around the world are wrestling with how to cope with the 64,000,000 people, worldwide currently uprooted from their homes by famine, war, disease, ethnic cleansing and drug wars – as our own nation's government processes grind even more slowly than usual over these debates.

I ask everyone to continue to listen. It's unlikely that I will say what anyone is anticipating and quite frankly as I wrestled with this sermon, I did not know what I was going to say until the reading and study, wrestling and prayer produced this product. Among the many resources I consulted was a webinar produced this year by the Presbyterian Church USA discussing the theology of the welcome of refugees. Many of the numbers or circumstances I reference come from that source.

## Sermon: Flight Risk

In classical art, the scenes portrayed in this text are known as *The Slaughter of the Innocents*, *The Flight to Egypt* and *The Return from Egypt*. As I mentioned them, no doubt many of us could see some of these painted images in our minds. It is likely that the images we see are interpretations of a story that is based in little historical fact. It's a tricky business trying to sort out facts from such ancient times with both the concept of "history" and record keeping technology so different from that of our age.

In this instance, there are conflicting implications. First, there is no extra-Biblical record of the slaughter Herod ordered. Of course, there is no extra-Biblical record of most of what we read in the Bible, and this would have been perceived as a minor event in a far-flung provincial capital. Second, under Roman law Herod would not have been permitted to order the executions without engaging a Roman legal process. On the other hand, extra-Biblical sources mention that Herod did violate Roman law when it came to ordering torture or death. It's a toss-up. Maybe it actually happened. Maybe it didn't.

That makes it more important that we consider what Matthew was doing with the story. For Matthew, more than any other gospel writer, it was important that Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection be seen, not as a denial of Israel's relationship with God, but as the fulfillment of all God's promises to the faithful. All the gospel writers record events as being the fulfillment of promises or prophecy, but none so often as Matthew—three times in this brief passage alone.

Joseph, famously warned in a dream, took his young family to Egypt –according to Matthew, so that God's child might be called out of Egypt. This interlude echoes two pieces of the early Israelite experience. The slaughter of children calls to mind Pharaoh's death sentence on the first-born sons of Israel in Egypt. Israel's presence in Egypt in the first place was triggered by famine in Israel—the Israelites migrated to avoid starvation. Joseph fled to Egypt because his son's life was at risk. Matthew completes the loop by letting us know that when it was safe to return to their homeland, they did so that the remainder of prophecy and fulfillment might occur within Israel as anticipated.

It's important for us to remember that all the scriptural authors had a guiding theology and purpose—and writing history as we understand it wasn't it. The drive behind the individual approaches was to create an understanding of humankind's, and particularly Israel's, relationship with our most holy God; to illuminate God's purposes for creation and the human role within it. We forget that at our peril.

The emigration to Egypt in time of famine, the resulting exodus twenty generations later, and the holy family's flight to Egypt in time of danger are important for us because the Israelites, and we, as their heirs in faith, as well as children of the story of Joseph's flight to Egypt, have as a central formative identity as the people of God these experiences of being strangers. Again and again throughout scripture, we are called upon to understand ourselves as ones who have been foreigners and aliens as we consider the treatment of foreigners and aliens among us.

We need to consider these experiences and commands of our Lord carefully, and take them seriously without simply slapping them over current circumstances, developments in national identities and worldview, any more than we lift stories of biology, geology, astrophysics and medicine from its pages to apply to our lives.

The geo-political world has changed radically from the time of scripture's development. The world population and crowding were not issues. The concepts of national borders and citizenship were nothing like what we have today. In Jesus' time, Rome had practically the only developed concept of citizenship. As might be expected, that citizenship had levels of freedom and layers of privilege. Citizenship could be awarded, but not applied for. Eventually tokens of citizenship appeared, but, in general, citizenship was revealed/confirmed by class, clothing, occupation and family rather than papers.

As a result of these radically different circumstances, try as we might, while there is clear and repetitive evidence that we have obligations for the treatment of refugees and aliens and their welcome, we would be hard pressed to discern a biblical mandate for a particular immigration policy of either inclusion or exclusion. That being said, we are not exempted from providing appropriate care and welcome for those we find among us. The message is so frequently found in scripture that even the most "unchurched" can still quote passages about that care.

As has been noted before, those rules for behavior that are most often repeated are for the behaviors that do not come naturally, that are the hardest to learn and the hardest to maintain by human creatures – us among them. History has shown and continues to show that not only in this country, not only among Caucasians but among people of every color, religion and ethnicity, difference is reviled, found frightening, rejected and considered especially undesirable if it weaves its way into one's own people or family. That is part of the inheritance of our human arrogance that led to the scattering of the peoples of the earth from the Tower of Babel –another story that may lack historicity, but clearly reflects the human condition.

To understand our identity as people who have been strangers and so, are called to greet strangers differently than simple human instinct would suggest, we need to acknowledge that we, sitting here today, are far from the experience of being refugees, immigrants and foreigners. We narrow that distance, less by reading scripture, than by hearing the stories of refugees and strangers among us. Here, we do a pretty good job with that, thanks to the excellent leadership of our adult education and mission teams.

We are far less effective at narrowing the distance among fellow citizens who disagree about immigration policy, who should be welcomed and when. If we are going to narrow that distance, we need to take seriously the concerns of those with whom we disagree—most commonly about concerns of crime, job security and the economics of social safety nets.

According to the statistics offered in the webinar I mentioned, typically, communities with high numbers of immigrants have a lower crime rate than others; HOWEVER, there are places where crime is higher in such communities.

Overall, there is job creation in immigrant communities, largely through the establishment of small businesses such as restaurants; HOWEVER, there are pockets of places where there is job displacement.

Over time, there is a net gain in productivity due to immigration; HOWEVER, reliance on social safety nets, such as supplemental nutrition (food stamps) programs typically lasts as long as a decade. Therefore, discounting such concerns as unrealistic, the result of a prejudice or racism or because of a threat to white privilege is dismissive of real human concerns.

Before we do it or do it again, we would do well to remind ourselves of the privilege we sitting here have accrued to ourselves or that has been accrued for us. Very few if any of us live in neighborhoods where there is or is likely to be a large refugee population. At the same time, many of us are uncomfortable going to neighborhoods in our own city, even accompanied by others from the church for mission work. Therefore, it is not our privilege to poo-poo the concerns of those who have such vulnerabilities.

Very few of us have jobs that will be threatened by an influx of refugees still learning the language and acquiring skills. Of course, our song might change, and already, I have heard it begin to change when we reflect on the potential educational and job opportunities of our children and grandchildren, as a result of an influx of refugees and immigrants. We might want to watch our finger-pointing.

Most of us can still afford our taxes and to live in our homes. However, the growing number of so-called zombie houses in the suburbs, usually former homes of the elderly, is beginning to challenge that affordability and

presumption of what hard work might provide in the future. Not many of us rely on supplemental nutrition programs, but increasing numbers of us rely on Medicare and Social Security, with increasing concerns about how long such social safety nets will be available to us. Again, we need to be cautious about judging people whose safety nets are already frayed or gone.

There are all kinds of flight risk in the world –what the world is particularly concerned with now is the flight of those whose risk of death is high for any of a number of reasons. Another kind is the risk we perceive or experience as a result of that flight. A third kind is the risk we create when with flight from our neighbors – the ones who agree with us and the ones who don't—so that through our own choices, the world becomes even more divided.

If we are welcoming to the stranger, alien and refugee among us, we need also be welcoming to the ones whose ideas are strange and alien to us and our experience. We need to develop understanding of both, along with greater humility about our own prejudices and privileges. If we want to participate with God in sending children to safe places, and calling people back to the homes where they dream of living with dignity and in safety—if we want to stop the building of walls between people, we need to start tearing down the walls in our hearts we have built between us and other people, whomever they may be—because we are all part of the same human family created by God.

### **Prayers for Others and Ourselves**

Glorious God: On this blessed Christmastide morn, we gather in worship and prayer, overwhelmed with wonder at this child born among us.

For the joys we share in human life – the making of marriages, the birth of children, the purpose of vocation, minds that can learn a new thing, hearts which can love more people, relationships which nurture, hands which can heal, we give you thanks, – we give you thanks not only for these things, but for the blessings of this week, we each name silently in our hearts:

For the vulnerabilities we share in human life – for fragile bodies that break and weaken with disease or age, for loneliness that aches for companionship, for grief that seeks consoling, for the hurts humans inflict on one another, relationships which are strained, for hopes that are shattered and for dreams that wish for a new day, we seek your healing, wisdom and courage – not only for these things but for the sake of ourselves and the whole world, especially those things we each name in the silence of our hearts.

We pray in the name of the one who came as an infant, ministered as a man and died and rose again as our Savior and Counselor, and who invites us to share his prayer:

### **The Lord's Prayer**