

Liturgical Date/Readings: Second Sunday after Christmas Year A- Readings: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84; Ephesians 1:3-6; 15-19a; Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

Date: January 5, 2020

Homilist: The Rev. Alanna M. Van Antwerpen

Community Context: 8 a.m., 10 a.m. Christ Church-Episcopal, Exeter, NH

Sources: The Text this Week, Working Preacher, “‘Jungle’ Refugee Camp in Calais far from a typical Christmas Story.” By Mark Hilliard; “‘The Jungle’: Christmas in a Refugee Camp” by Masha Alekhina

This weekend many of us may experience the feeling of getting back to reality as the holidays end. Tomorrow we find ourselves going back to deadlines, new projects for the New Year and the regular rhythm of relationships.

In today’s Gospel reading we encounter Joseph as he comes out on the other side of Jesus’ birth, the good news of the shepherd’s, and the visit of the wise men. Reality is closing in on him as he realizes that his family cannot go back to normal life because it is too dangerous “for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” Like any parent wanting to protect their family, he does what’s necessary to keep them safe from harm. Joseph doesn’t spend time deliberating the merit of the angel’s message. It seems he knows in the pit of his stomach that his newly born, adopted, son is exceptional enough to be a threat to those in power.

Our Savior’s family—who is already displaced because of needing to go to Bethlehem to be registered—needs to migrate at once, seeking asylum in a foreign land until their home is safe enough to return to.

This is a story all too familiar in our world, so familiar that it *even shows up* in our sacred scripture.

Looking back on the last several years, the world’s movement of displaced people seems to have reached a fever pitch: from Syrian refugees fleeing civil war, to African migrants fleeing home grown terror groups, to people in South America fleeing drug cartels. And while most of these situations are brought about by human crises there are those experiencing displacement due to natural disasters as well—like earthquakes, rising sea levels, or the tornadoes and flooding here in the United States.

Needing to leave your home for any reason, let alone severe political, economic or natural crisis, is difficult. Our Gospel reminds us that no one is exempt, not even God’s only Son.

Speaking about these realities can leave us overwhelmed, feeling helpless, or even threatened that someone in such desperate need will end up infringing upon our way of life. It’s only natural to be wary of the political, social and economic consequences of such massive movements of people.

Yet, no matter what our stance politically or socially, our faith calls us to move forward from apathy to empowerment, from scarcity to generosity so that we don’t give into fear and violence by objectifying people different than ourselves. But how do we do this? When we are so

overwhelmed dealing with the everyday challenges of *our* lives—providing for our own families—the question remains, how do we do this?

Well, solutions are difficult and complex but there are a few practices that can help keep us in touch with our faith’s instruction to care for those who are widowed, orphaned and displaced.

First, remembering stories of displacement both in our Christian tradition as well as in our family histories helps us remain grounded in compassion. We cultivate compassion and empathy when we remember how it feels to be displaced, desperate and confused. As far back as Adam and Eve scripture tells us of the struggles of those needing to leave their home. Even the disciples are asked to move out from the places they know in order to spread the gospel. Whether it’s of one’s own choice or out of necessity, being displaced is always challenging.

For us, we may know what it’s like being homeless; or needing to move due to medical issues because our age or ability prevents us living in our own home any longer; or being an outsider in a social situation; or needing to start over because of an unhealthy relationship. In its own way, as Christ Church enters this time of Rector Mark’s sabbatical, there can be a sense of displacement of the regular routine, or fear of the unexpected. Remembering *our* experiences helps us remain empathic to others dealing with being displaced. In Christ Church’s case, the staff, vestry and leadership is prepared to navigate this territory alongside each of you.

In terms of people seeing refuge, in a second way, maintaining compassion and empathy in a cynical world helps us to remain committed to not objectifying someone else or groups of people. This simply means not seeing another person as inhuman or merely a problem to be solved. Once a person or a group becomes objectified, we can get in trouble by distancing ourselves from their humanity. In turn, this numbs us from understanding that their struggles could someday be *our* struggles. In my own family’s history one story that has been retold over and over again is that when my ancestors emigrated from Ireland, they were faced with signs that read "Irish need not apply" as they began their life in the United States.

One way to avoid objectifying people is simply to name those going through something *as people*. For example, instead of saying **the** homeless, saying people who are homeless; or **the** elderly, saying older people; or **the** poor, saying people who are poor. Even a small practice like this leads us to the alternative to objectification *which is relationship*.

When we’re in relationship with another person there’s an opportunity to foster trust. Spiritually we do this through prayer, simply allowing ourselves to see God as an ongoing conversation partner. This informs our relationships with others as we seek to build meaningful community responses for people in need. We do this through volunteering, advocacy and spending time helping organizations who assist people in need. As Christ Church hosts the Seacoast Family Promise, you as a community are practicing this important spiritual exercise. Another example is when one such volunteer visiting a refugee camp said, “At Christmas you can dream of a miracle, or you can try to be the miracle for someone else.”¹

¹ “‘The Jungle’: Christmas in a Refugee Camp” by Masha Alekhina

Through realizing that we can try to be the miracle for someone else simply by fulfilling Christ's call to love our neighbor as ourselves, we also realize that our displacement or someone else's is not the end of the story. God didn't abandon Joseph and his family— they were brought back to their land when it was safe—they were able to settle where they needed to even if it was not their original home. Although not everyone can make it back to their homeland, like in my own family, they can use their talents and skills contributing to making a new place their home while making it better. For better or worse, the issue of migration, displacement and refugees is part of our human story.

Yet as followers of Jesus Christ, even in difficult times we know the hope of new beginnings, new life and possibilities. May we have the faith to meet each other in our displacement, and in so doing, may we live into being the Christmas miracle of joy, hope and love that we seek in our world.