

Christmas II
January 3, 2016
Trinity Parish, Seattle

Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84 or 84:1-8; Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a; Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

On the town green of North Andover, Massachusetts, there stands a statue of one of its more famous citizens, Phillips Brooks. He was the Rector of Trinity Church in Boston and then Bishop of Massachusetts in the early 20th century. He was also one of America's best known preachers. He is known by people around the world as the author of a beloved Christmas carol, O Little Town of Bethlehem.

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and dreamless streets the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light.
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

We tend at Christmas time to focus our attention on the hopes – and not the fears – that are met in Bethlehem on that first Christmas night.

But as we hear in the Gospel today, there is also a very dark side to Christmas. This brief passage tells in the most oblique way a tale of terror, one that in today's vocabulary would be nothing short of genocide.

King Herod has heard from some traveling star gazers from the East that a child has been born who will be king of Israel. Frightened – and no doubt threatened – by this news, he tells them to let him know when they have found the child so that he may also go and pay him homage. When the wise men do not return, because they have been warned in a dream to leave by another route, Herod sends his troops to find the child and kill him. In so doing, they find and kill all the male children under the age of two in the vicinity of Bethlehem, an event that Matthew understands as the fulfillment of a prophecy from the book of Jeremiah, where the prophet says, "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." (Matthew 2:18)

The agony and the terror of mothers and fathers and children who witness the snatching and killing of their baby boys is a part of this story we would just as soon not have to think about.

Meanwhile, Joseph has been warned in a dream to leave Bethlehem and escape to Egypt because Herod wants to kill Mary's baby. So, he leaves under cover of darkness with Mary and Jesus and travels to Egypt where they will be safe. And they remain there until Joseph is told in another dream that Herod has died and that it is safe to return to their home country.

Joseph and Mary and Jesus were refugees. Fleeing to a place of safety in order to save their lives. From a purely theological point of view, this story underscores the extent to which God goes to share our humanity. From a very human point of view, it is a story oft repeated throughout history and still today.

For much of the past four years the world had paid scant attention to another refugee crisis in the Middle East – one of historic proportions – in Syria and surrounding countries. That changed this past September 2nd when the pictures of a young boy, whose body had washed up on the shore of a Turkish beach went viral. It was and is a heartbreaking picture. I still weep when I see it. But the fact is that tens or hundreds of thousands of children just like him and people of all ages have died tragic deaths in the terror that has swept Syria for four long years. Over four million people in a country of 22 million have left their homes for fear, many risking their lives to travel to safe havens in surrounding countries, and even to Europe. We have seen the pictures of desperate people going to great lengths to escape to safety and to begin a life in a new place. It's hard for most of us to imagine how bad life would have to be for us to be willing to leave home and everything we know to go to a strange country, with a strange culture and language, to begin life over again. No one does so without compelling and tragic circumstances.

My own views of this refugee crisis are, admittedly, colored by my experiences of being in refugee camps both in the Middle East and in Africa. Over a decade ago I spent time in Dheishe Refugee Camp just outside that little town of Bethlehem – now a sizeable city in the West Bank just a few miles from Jerusalem. I met older people who had been there since they were forcibly removed from their homes in 1947-48 to make way for the new State of Israel. Some still have the key to the home they owned in Haifa or other cities in the region. I also visited the Jenin

Refugee Camp in the West Bank where generations of Palestinians have grown up unable to return to their homes, and camps in Gaza where despair and hopelessness fester in the souls of people.

More recently I've spent time in camps in the eastern Congo and Kenya where people suffer in what seem like some of the most dire circumstances you can imagine, except that are still better than where they have come from. I have watched in all these places the efforts of humanitarians from the UN and many other NGOs who care for refugees and do their best to help give people the basic necessities of life.

I know it is difficult to hear about and to see – even on our television screens. And hard as it may be for us to believe, refugees are people just like you and me, who through no fault of their own have found themselves at the center of some of life's most horrible and tragic circumstances. We hear lots of fear in our country today about who these people are, appealing to people's baser instincts rather than hard cold facts. And the choice before us all is whether we will let our fears rule our judgment more than our compassion for human suffering and need.

The Episcopal Church, along with other denominations, has been involved with the resettlement of refugees entering this country for many years, and will continue to do so. Of the approximately 10,000 Syrian refugees who will come to the US in the coming year (which, by the way, is a tiny fraction of what most European countries are doing, and an even smaller fraction of the number of refugees waiting for resettlement), about 500 will come here to the state of Washington. Our diocese will be responsible for resettling 50 of those under the auspices of our Refugee Resettlement Office.

This is an important opportunity for us to be involved in some of the most basic ministry to which Jesus calls us and on behalf of people for whom he surely has a special place in his heart – ministry that involves welcoming the stranger, loving our neighbor as ourselves, reaching out to those in need and offering compassion and mercy. And just as important is that we stand up against the racism and Islamophobia that are being promoted by far too many in this country, including some prominent politicians. It is our chance to bear witness to another truth from our history, and that is that when we allow fear to rule our judgment, we make decisions that we live to regret. Actions that come from love and

compassion have the opposite effect – they actually dispel the fear and lead us to freedom and peace.

Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, recently said in relation to the refugee crisis that “our hospitality and love are our most formidable weapons against hatred and extremism.” His words seemed to be an echo of St. John’s first epistle where he says that “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear...” (I John 4:18)

One of my favorite spiritual writers is Parker Palmer. He wrote a New Year’s piece for Krista Tippett of NPR’s On Being program. He says he set out to write about his five resolutions for the new year, but when he looked at the page, it said “five revolutions” – and he decided that that was actually more what he wanted them to be. The first one is so appropriate, and that is “The revolution against our fear of ‘otherness,’ and against those who manipulate this fear for their self-serving ends.” He says, “I want to stand in solidarity with those whose lives have been made even more difficult by the ignorance, cruelty, and shamelessness of [certain public figures] and their minions. When I hear people speaking against Muslims or Mexicans, to take but two examples, I need to say, ‘Your words are personally offensive to me. I am one with the people you’re insulting, and I can’t remain silent while you put my sisters and brothers down.’ I may not change anyone’s mind, but I need to witness to my membership in the human community whenever I get the chance.”

There are fears that are real, and there are fears that are imagined. Most of those being pushed in this country are imagined, and yet they take on a life of their own unless we stop them. The real fears we should be concerned about are the fears of those who have had to flee their homes because of barrel bombs falling from the sky, the fears that their children will not be able to grow up to be adults, or to get an education, or have their basic needs met, or know any of the things we expect for ourselves and our children. When we start to care at least as much about their fears as we do our own, we will have begun to know what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves.

In this Christmas season we must not forget the Holy Family as they fled across a border to find safety. Nor should we forget the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem, that little town in which yes, the hopes and the fears of all the years were met in the birth of a child, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.