

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario  
Sunday, December 29, 2019  
Rev. Dr. Andrew Fullerton

“Jesus was a refugee”

**St. Matthew 2:13** *“Take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt.”*

Before he'd learned to walk and talk, Jesus was a refugee. The wise men had barely left before Joseph scooped him up, took Mary by the hand, and fled for Egypt, steps ahead of Herod's Gestapo, who swept in to do their nasty work, killing the children under two years of age. For Paranoid Herod feared a rival had been born in Bethlehem. 'A new king', he was called. Like millions down the centuries, who've been driven from their homes – economic refugees, political refugees, and now *climate* refugees – Jesus was born, not as a prince but as a peasant. From the manger to the cross, he went through life in poverty, without privilege or protection. Even as a vulnerable infant, Jesus became a refugee.

Yet we say he is 'Immanuel', God with us, and his birth begins our salvation. For God transforms what God touches, the way a drop of red dye, splashed into a clear glass of water, colours the whole glass. For God the Son came to be with us in the person of Jesus, not just to touch our humanity but to wear it himself. And this begins the healing of every corner of human life.

If this were not so, our salvation would be unworldly, esoteric, and 'new-agey'. And God's Church would have no reason to care about refugees, or economic well-being, or political justice, or the welfare of nature itself, now devastated by our way of living. In other words, our salvation wouldn't touch every corner of our lives. Salvation would be confined to a box labelled 'spiritual things.' That box would hold the promise of an afterlife, perhaps, and mystic methods to induce intense religious feelings, maybe. But it would have nothing to do with the hard job of loving our neighbour, with confession and forgiveness, or the discipline exacted by faith as we try to make it real in every corner of our lives. It would only be a spiritual hobby. And it wouldn't need a Saviour to be born in a stable and die on a cross.

It's a sure sign of a false spirituality when it turns its back on politics and the material world, from life as we actually live it. William Temple – he was Archbishop of Canterbury during the Second World War – used to say, “Christianity is the most materialist of all religions, because its most central saying is, ‘the Word became

flesh’.” For God became human, not to beam us from earth to heaven, like the crew of Star Trek returning to the Enterprise, but to be, first of all, the “joy of heaven to earth come down.” Isn’t that why we sing, ‘Love came down at Christmas’? The Son *leaves* ‘the household of perfect love’ shared between Father, Son and Holy Spirit to be *with* us, to journey like a refugee as far into the far country as a cross on a hill in Jerusalem, so that we may find refuge (a lasting home) in him. For love can never *just* be something ‘felt’, can it? Love must also be ‘done’. I suppose that’s why, if we’re to attempt this Christian life, we may be called on to make a refugee’s journey too.

King Herod can’t conceive of this. He doesn’t join the wise men to pay homage to Jesus. He sends henchmen to Bethlehem to slaughter him. But love? Love makes the journey. It abandons the safety of those palace walls we build around us, our barbed-wire borders. Love enters unknown country to risk friendship with the stranger, to be vulnerable before the beloved. Is that not what the cross is about?

How difficult this is! If I try to control someone’s response to me, it’s not yet love, is it? I’m only making myself *feel* secure by making the other one do whatever counts as love in my eyes. This is the hazard of gift-giving. It’s wrapped with a lovely bow, yes, but does it also have a string attached? But real love is vulnerable. We must offer it freely, each in our own way, yes, but without strings, and then wait for a response. And in that moment of waiting we relinquish control. Will the other respond to our gift? Will they receive our love? Will they return it? T.S. Eliot has one of the characters in his play, “The Cocktail Party”, say this:

*...to approach the stranger  
Is to invite the unexpected, to release a new force,  
Or let the genie out of the bottle.  
It is to start a train of events  
Beyond your control.*

“Beyond your control” – three frightening words. Being modern, we’re prone to believe the kind of salvation we need is a state of total control. But that would just be Herod’s police state all over again, wouldn’t it?

Jesus’ own humanity shows us the kind of salvation our human nature needs, and it’s just the opposite. It’s the state of vulnerability in which love is truly given, received and returned, as the gift it always is. For life itself is a gift we could not create; we live on a planet we did not make; we’re born into families we did not choose; we’re conditioned by a history we had no part in; we’re heading for a future

we cannot foresee; and “the Spirit blows where it wills.” How did we ever think we could have total control? Yet we greet every new piece of technology with fanfare. We place our faith in technology – which is to say, in ourselves – because it promises to put the levers of control firmly in *our* hands. But we’re learning that’s a lie. Technology is our strength, maybe, but it’s not our refuge. It’s not the homeland the refugee yearns for. It’s not our salvation.

Which brings us back to King Herod. If we’ve seen one tyrant, we’ve seen them all. The King Herods of the world cannot *do* what Jesus does. They cannot love. They only want to consolidate and extend the power they think they own. They can’t see that power owns *them* – the way a drug owns the addict, the way money owns the miser, the way fear owns the bully. In the same way arrogance ‘arrogates’ to itself power and property and privilege, claiming for itself what it has no right to, what it has not earned and does not deserve. Protected by palace walls, it loses touch with the truth of life. Such power is false and full of fear. It yields vast inequality, and corporate malfeasance, and political corruption. Challenged, it flies into a murderous rage. The King Herods of the world fear Jesus – or would do, if they met him. They’d fear starting a train of events that would make them lose control. This means they cannot love. That’s why tyrants can never bring us real justice and salvation. They can only wield the power of violence, which is just what Jesus – who was himself battered by the violence of power – would never do.

The ‘bookends’ of Jesus’ life reveal his character, don’t they? Fleeing Herod at the beginning of his life, he was crucified by Pontius Pilate at the end; born in a barn beside beasts, he died on a cross beside thieves. But Jesus would never mimic his persecutors, for he was love incarnate. And that is why he can be the Prince of Peace and the source of our salvation. For love cannot just be felt; it must also be done.

So, once the Christmas lights are unplugged and the decorations packed away, and we’ve said farewell to this old year, and if we still long for a salvation more real than a spiritual hobby and more lasting than bacchanalian feast, let’s remember this: God’s love is a gift. And the giver made himself a refugee to put this gift into your hands and mine, with no strings attached. So, the question to meditate upon, finally, is this. In the coming New Year, how will we respond to this gift?