

## 1-7-18 Sermon: “Jesus On the Run” – Matthew 2:13-23

Well, it sounds like baby Jesus is on the run!

Just two weeks ago, we were welcoming the Christ child into the world with candles, lessons, and carols. But today, the shepherds have left, the angels have disappeared, and the wise men are back on their camels, heading home. Joseph and Mary are plenty worn out, I imagine, and they’re ready to settle in to some semblance of ‘normal life’ with their new baby, Jesus.

And then, as they finally drift off into some much-needed sleep, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him he needs to wake up Mary and the baby and flee to Egypt as quickly as possible. So much for “silent night, holy night, sleep in heavenly peace.”

And why exactly *is* the Savior of the world on the run? Well, it turns out that the God who is saving the world and redeeming all of creation in Jesus Christ has found himself at cross purposes with the ways of empire, of human kings and dictators. Herod heard the wise men call Jesus ‘the child born King of the Jews’, a threat to Herod’s own power as the current King of the Jews. And like any of tyrants our world has known, Herod, has no concern for legal or moral boundaries. He will stop at nothing, not even murder – not even genocide – to eliminate a threat to his power.

And so, Jesus and his family are forced to flee. Following God’s instructions, they flee to the neighboring country of Egypt. Now, nothing in the story suggests that Mary or Joseph has ever *been* to Egypt before. They have no family or friends in Egypt. Likely they don’t even speak the language. But they need to go somewhere outside the realm of Herod’s power, and so – Egypt it is!

In a few short verses, the song of the angels has been muted to anxious whispers, as a family runs for their lives under the cover of night. This Christmas story, that begins with a holy child visited by kings and shepherds alike, has now become a story about refugees under the threat of death, who are forced into hiding in a land that is not their own.

Biblical scholars tell us that this picture of Jesus ‘on the run’, this portrait of a persecuted and displaced holy family forced to flee their home and live as refugees, would have been a familiar one for the people who first read Matthew’s Gospel. Most scholars believe that Matthew wrote his gospel in the final decades of the first century AD, which means he was writing in the aftermath of a bitter war between the Romans and the Jews. It’s likely that many of Matthew’s first readers *were* refugees of war, who had fled their homes for safety during the war and eventually had to settle among strangers. Matthew’s community would have recognized themselves and their neighbors in the plight of the holy family, of a Jesus who is ‘on the run.’

We, too, can look at the Refugee Jesus and recognize something of ourselves and our neighbors, can’t we? We who live in the year 2018 are bearing witness to what historians and sociologists are calling the largest refugee crisis in history, with over 65 million people worldwide fleeing their homes because they fear for their lives. That means that roughly 1 out of every 110 people living in our world today is, in one way or another, ‘on the run.’<sup>1</sup> And just like Jesus, more than half of the refugees fleeing home are children.<sup>2</sup> King Herod may be long gone, but his legacy has certainly outlived him.

The session of this church took action last month to stand in solidarity with our neighbors who, like Jesus, find themselves for one reason or another ‘on the run.’ I want to tell you a little bit about that action this morning. In December, our congregation was invited by our larger Presbyterian denomination to sign onto an amicus brief seeking to halt the repeal of the immigration policy known as DACA – Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals.

Many of you are familiar with DACA or with the “Dreamers” – undocumented immigrants who were brought into the United States as children and have since grown up – some into teenagers and young adults – in this country. DACA, the immigration policy, which our church has taken a stand to support, establishes a renewable two-year period of safety for these children and young adults – these Dreamers – during which they can work and live in the United States. They can get their papers in order and apply for citizenship or residency without having to live in constant fear of being deported.

Our session took the decision of whether or not to sign onto this amicus brief seriously. We discussed the way these policies affect the Taos community as a whole, and we talked about the effect on Dreamers in our community. And then, praying that God would guide us toward the most faithful decision, our session unanimously voted that yes, we would sign on. As one session member put it, the decision to stand in solidarity with the Dreamers is far bigger than any political issue or situation: this is a *humanitarian* issue, for us and our neighbors.

Our official letter joining us to the amicus brief reads: “We at First Presbyterian Church of Taos sign on in the spirit of Leviticus 19, which calls us not to oppress immigrants but to love each immigrant as ourselves. And we sign in the spirit of Matthew 25, in which Jesus reminds his disciples that when we welcome a stranger, we welcome Jesus Christ himself.”

Our session made a bold and courageous decision for our congregation, and I believe it’s a decision that we as a church should celebrate and be proud of. Because if I understand this text, this story about Jesus the immigrant – the refugee – teaches us that the God we meet in Jesus Christ is a God who shows up for people who are ‘on the run.’

That’s what happens in this story, isn’t it? Wherever the holy family goes, God goes with them. God shows up when Joseph dreams: guiding him from Bethlehem to Egypt to Nazareth. God leads them, and protects them, and reassures them that they are not alone. That God is with them even while they are ‘on the run.’

I think our session understood that truth. I think they recognized that living as faithful disciples means that wherever God shows up, we too will show up. In the stories of the Bible and in our daily lives God is present and made known to God’s people in the kindness of strangers. In the hospitality that welcomes the immigrant, the refugee, the foreigner – even the enemy. In the brotherly and sisterly love that feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, visits the person who is in prison, and welcomes the stranger. Our faith teaches us that *these* are the places where God shows up because these are the people closest to God’s heart. God cared about Jesus, Mary, and Joseph two thousand years ago, and God continues to care today about the Dreamers today.

It’s an interesting choice of word, isn’t it? “Dreamers?” For where is God present in the holy family’s flight to Egypt except in dreams? Joseph’s waking world is full of fear, of running and hiding. Of lands that are unfamiliar, and languages he does not speak. Of tyrant kings out to kill his little child. But when he dreams, Joseph sees God.

Today we celebrate a liturgical holiday called Epiphany. We celebrate the seemingly impossible truth that in Jesus Christ, we encounter the very God who created the heavens and the earth. And what’s more, on epiphany we celebrate the way that God *continues* to manifest himself in the world; the way that God’s light breaks in through the darkness and shines on us in a moment of clarity, and insight, and new life – in moments of epiphany!

For Joseph, God shows up in dreams. For many of us, God shows up in church, or in our relationships with one another. Perhaps for you God shows up in the mountains, or in soup kitchens, or in AA meetings, or at the grocery store. It doesn’t really matter where. The truth of epiphany is simply that God shows up.

And the message of epiphany, if we have ears to hear it, is that when God *does* show up, we are called to welcome him. That is our commission, as disciples of Jesus Christ. When God shows up, wherever that may be, we roll out the welcome mat.

So friends, let us look at the world around us with eyes to see where God is about to appear. In a palace or a stable. In a friend, or a stranger, or even an enemy. Let us begin again that holy work of welcoming Jesus Christ into our midst. It's hard work to be sure. It's work that may be uncomfortable, or even controversial. It may mean risking our own security, or respectability.

Let's do it anyway. For the grace, and the challenge, and the hope of the Gospel is that we worship a God who shows up in dreams and in Dreamers alike.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2016/06/refugee-crisis-160620083009119.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/06/20/533634405/five-surprising-facts-about-the-refugee-crisis>