

Advent 3B
Peace, Seattle
December 17, 2017
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, John 1:19-28

FINDING REFUGE IN HIM

We'll finally reach it at 8:28am Thursday this week—the winter solstice—the shortest day and longest night of the year for us residents of the northern hemisphere. And this year, more than most, I'm looking forward to being on the other side; looking forward to the growth of light—even if that growth is at first imperceptibly small.

The darkness I find myself so eager to move away from isn't so much the astronomical darkness that characterizes life in late December at this latitude.

While these dark days can be extremely difficult for those with Seasonal Affective Disorder, the absence of sun doesn't take that kind of toll on me personally.

No, my longing is different. It has to do with a world weighed down with intractable problems, unsolvable conflicts, environmental crises, false promises, and the same kinds of ideological and political battles that have been waged under various flags and labels for centuries.

Thursday morning I was in my car when a radio segment began commemorating the 5th anniversary of the Sandy Hook School massacre. I had to turn it off. I just couldn't go there.

Later that evening, I was in the car again on my way to pick up Naomi from basketball practice when another segment aired. This one was about two fathers, Greg and Mark, who lost sons to school gun violence exactly two decades apart.

When Greg learned of the Sandy Hook shooting on the 20th anniversary of his son Galen's death, he wanted to offer something, so he reached out to Mark to offer empathy and support. In their first meeting they learned that their sons, Galen and Daniel, had not only lost their lives on the same calendar day, but by coincidence the boys shared the same birthday.¹

"People are very happy to talk about what a weird coincidence it is," said Greg, "They're so much more interested in that than in how we can stop this from happening again. That's the mystery to me."

It's been five years since this slaughter of the innocents and so little has changed. Our collective inability to forestall the murder of innocent children, women, and men by rampaging gunmen is truly obscene.

I find myself grasping ever more tightly the simple line—really a statement of faith—that marks the beginning of Evening Prayer in Christian households and communities of faith the world over—

Jesus Christ, you are the light of the world; the light no darkness can overcome.

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/14/570927239/five-years-after-sandy-hook-tragedy-how-two-dads-turned-grief-into-action>

In keeping with the United Nations Calendar, we're marking today as Migrants and Refugees Sunday.

As we gather here, thousands of migrants, refugees, and displaced people the world over are streaming away from the places they've called home—perhaps for generations—due to ongoing war, violence, economic crises, and ethnic cleansing.

Stunningly, in 2015 an average of 24 people were forced to flee every minute of every hour of every day throughout the year. That's 4 times the amount from a decade earlier,² and the pace since 2015 has only increased. At that rate, it would take under five minutes for this sanctuary to be empty.

Worldwide, more than “50 million children have migrated across borders or been forcibly displaced,” and almost 1 in 3 children living outside their birth countries are refugees.³

And children are uniquely vulnerable to the worst parts of the refugee crisis. Because they often travel alone with limited resources, they are at heightened risk of exploitation, including trafficking, sexual exploitation, and enslaved labor.

What's it like to leave the only place you've ever known, the only life you've ever lived, in the rearview mirror—knowing you may never find another? Being separated from mother and father, languishing in a refugee camp for decades depending on others—some of them benevolent, some of them predatory—for the chance of getting a new home, a chance that for most will never come?

Emily Garin, who helped author the U.N. Report CHILDREN ON THE RUN, points out that “Existing international law protects children and obligates states that have ratified the Convention [on the Rights of the Child] to protect children, all children, on their territory regardless of their legal status, the legal status of their parents, how they arrived, [or] the conditions under which they arrived. What we're advocating for,” she says, “is that governments live up to these obligations that they've already committed themselves to.”⁴

The hard truth is, things don't necessarily get easier for those who do reach their destinations.

Refugee children are five times more likely to be out of school, and often face discrimination, exclusion, or threats in their new countries. They're also more likely to be deported because of a lack of legal aid, and sent back to countries where they may face threats and danger. Even those who aren't deported may be detained or incarcerated at their destination country over their migration status.⁵

Last spring our church council endorsed our participation in the AMMPORO Ministry of the ELCA. The word “*amparo*” in Spanish means “the protection of a living creature from suffering or damage.” The ministry of AMMPORO is about accompanying minor migrants with protection, advocacy, representation, and opportunities.⁶

We've had one opportunity thus far to help a young man named Alexander from Honduras as he settled into a new host home. But much more awaits us. The refugee kits that some of us are putting

² <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/6/5763b65a4/global-forced-displacement-hits-record-high.html>

³ <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/about-us/background/56fc266f4/children-on-the-run-full-report.html?query=children%20report>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/AMMPARO_BriefSummary.pdf?_ga=2.99499230.1170842544.1513447864-2077801524.1513447864

together are an expression of the Circle of Welcome that we, as followers of Jesus, are called to extend to all who have been forced by circumstances beyond their control to seek refuge.

The journey these vulnerable people make reminds us of the journey Joseph, Mary and the infant Jesus took when, according to Matthew's gospel, King Herod sought to murder the newborn King.

Like so many modern day refugees, the Holy Family fled by night. Taking only what they could carry, they followed the footsteps of their ancestors and found refuge from Herod's madness in a country not their own.

Two thousand years later, there is madness right here at home we have yet to confront.

In yesterday's [Seattle Times](#) there was a one-column article about words which the Administration is forbidding officials at the Center for Disease Control to use as they prepare proposals for next year's federal budget. Top on the list—the word “vulnerable.”⁷ As if, by banishing the use of certain language the Administration can make dark realities magically disappear!

These attempts—and there are a growing number of examples in a growing number of fields—to exert political control over the vocabulary that our premier research institutions use to describe the realities and challenges our nation faces are truly alarming.

In spite of horrific events like what took place at Sandy Hook, Congress has continued to block the CDC from securing dedicated funding for the study and prevention of gun violence. In fact, laws on the books since 1996 specifically state that “None of the funds made available for injury prevention and control at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention may be used to advocate or promote gun control.”⁸

In the current political climate, standing firm on our vocation to minister with and advocate for vulnerable people—including those who live under threat of violence in any form, as well as displaced migrants and refugees—is faith commitment from which we dare not shrink.

The third Sunday of Advent is Gaudete Sunday in some traditions, from the Latin word for REJOICE.

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you,” Paul writes.

But it's hard to rejoice when our eyes and ears are inundated with so much evidence for what's gone wrong with the world. The only way out of what can become a closed circle of despair is to listen for a voice beyond ourselves that speaks of hope. And, thank God, we have such voices in our texts today.

“The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,” declares the prophet, “for the LORD has anointed me and sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners...to trade garlands for ashes, the oil of gladness for mourning, the mantle of praise for a faint spirit.”

Unlike last week's soothing pronouncement from the prophet Isaiah—COMFORT MY PEOPLE!—today's words did not reach Israel's ears DURING exile but rather AFTER they'd returned home.

⁷ [The Seattle Times](#), December 16, 2017, page 1A. The article was written by Lena H. Sun and Juliet Eilperin of [The Washington Post](#). The other words are: entitlement, diversity, transgender, fetus, evidence-based and science-based.

⁸ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/storyline/wp/2015/01/14/why-the-cdc-still-isnt-researching-gun-violence-despite-the-ban-being-lifted-two-years-ago/?utm_term=.2c9d7f7d7755

This homecoming, which Isaiah announced with some of the most eloquent and soaring speech in all the Scriptures, had joy attached to it, for sure, but it was also riddled with challenges.

The great city of Zion, which the exiles had heard their grandparents tell stories about, was a jumbled collection of ruins and rubble when they arrived. Home didn't feel like home. They were starting from scratch.

What's more, the habits of empire and hierarchy they'd learned during two generations of Babylonian captivity was taking a toll on their community life. Becoming fully responsible for themselves was proving to be more difficult than any of them thought.

Into this mixed experience a hope is proclaimed that, the LORD says, will be as real as the green shoots emerging from your gardens in the spring; as tangible as the stones of the city and Temple you'll be erecting once more.

Living at the intersection of despair and possibility, God's people need to hear that they are not alone, that God has a vision for how all of this is going to work out, and that's what Isaiah gives them.

And, as it turns out, gives us.

When we see that God is calling us to share in the divine vocation of bringing good news to the oppressed and release to the prisoners, then it begins to dawn on us that the surest way out of the cycle of despair is to stop the hand-wringing and start the work, to get on with the mission, in God's name.

It's when faith grows legs that we find ourselves meeting God along the way, and begin to see that we are not alone but are surrounded by people of good will, and then, the clouds begin to clear and the light begins to dawn.

In our gospel John tells those who seek his credentials:

Among you stands one whom you do not know.

How can we know this one who stands among us?

The gospel's answer to that question is to invite us to go to places in the world where children are displaced, where neighbors are suffering, where the vulnerable wait for care, and the hungry long for bread, and to form community with them. For when we do this, we will find ourselves in the company of Christ.

And when we find ourselves in his company, then we will have all the light we need to push back the darkness.

Let us pray. Jesus, light of the world, lighten our darkness. Give us such robust faith in you that we will find within ourselves a voice that challenges the status quo, and the will to reach beyond our fears to embrace those whom you send us to serve, whether close at hand, or across the globe. Amen.