

Second Sunday of Christmas

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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January 1, 2017

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

There's a picture I haven't been able to get out of my head for weeks now. My friend shared it on Facebook and its haunting image has been constantly on my mind. It shows a young couple – a man and a woman – walking through a desolate street. The man's face is tired and shows a blank gaze as he balances his sleeping child in one arm and a medical IV drip in the other. The woman's face is covered as the three hastily make their way down the street – their urgency is clear. In his post, my friend quoted today's gospel text, "And so he arose, took the child and his mother by night, and fled into Egypt." Because even though this was a picture taken just two weeks ago of a young family fleeing the advancing government forces in the Syrian city of Aleppo, it could just as easily be a picture from more than 2000 years ago of the Holy Family fleeing the advancing government forces in Bethlehem. Because my friend shared this picture just days before Christmas and because I

knew that this was today's appointed text, this is the image that has colored my celebrations this season.

This is the part of the Christmas story that often doesn't make it into our celebrations or onto our greeting cards. This is the gritty reality of the season that pushes us to think beyond the beautiful story we know so well and challenges us to grapple with what it really means for Jesus to come into this world.

For many of us, myself included, this Christmas season has been a respite from a difficult year. While I am not convinced that 2016 was particularly any more terrible than any other year, there were things about last year that make many of us glad to see January 1 come at last. So many beloved celebrities and role models died. Place names got seared into our collective consciousness because of the tragedy or violence that happened there – places like Orlando, Dallas, St. Paul, Nice, Istanbul, Brussels, Berlin, Aleppo, and yes, even Chicago. Our country seems more divided than ever after a scathing election cycle and our President-elect campaigned on a platform that would deny refuge to people fleeing persecution and war like the family in that picture that is still so fresh in my mind.

For many of us, Christmas has been a time to celebrate rather than worry – to spend time with family and (hopefully) not fight about politics. A time to revel with loved ones and be thankful for the beautiful mystery of God

coming to us as a little baby. It's not a time we want to focus on sad stories or challenging topics and certainly not think about stories like we hear in today's gospel – a text of terror full of fear and unimaginable violence.

But if we want to understand the true meaning of Christmas, we have to keep in mind exactly these things that we might want to escape from. Because, what does it mean to celebrate Emmanuel – God with us – if God is only here during the good times? What happens when the parties end? Where is God when we can't celebrate or when Christmas isn't a time where we can feel loved? If you ask me, that's exactly why today's gospel is so important to the Christmas story, challenging though it may be. It's, as one theologian has called it, Matthew's Vision of the Incarnation, Part II. Today Matthew is reminding us that the crazy thing about this incarnation where God comes to us to dwell with us is that God is here with us during the good times *and* the bad. The story is more than shepherds and sheep and angels and magi – it's a story where God became fully human and lived a fully human life. And God didn't choose to be born in a palace or a privileged family, but to a poor couple living under oppression. A couple who feared for the life of their baby. God chose to come into this world as the son of a family who would soon become refugees as they fled their homeland in search safety.

For some, this radical incarnation was seen as a threat to their power. King Herod was determined to do whatever it took to hold on to his own

power – even murdering countless innocent children. It was into this terrifying reality that God’s incarnation was given its truest meaning – that God stands with God’s people through the most tragic and challenging times. The incarnation means that God has, and continues to, fully experience these things with God’s people. That God knows what it means to weep and to mourn and to flee for life itself and God is with those who know what these things mean too. On this day, we remember how God became human and so quickly became a refugee as God clung on to that life and new birth that we celebrate during this season of Christmas. So in a way, that picture of the family fleeing Aleppo really can give us a fuller understanding of our Christmas celebrations. In a way, that family really is the Holy Family who fled the wrath of a murderous and oppressive dictator. Because in the face of every refugee, every victim of violence, every person reeling from tragedy, we have the chance to glimpse the face of God found in Christ Jesus who fled to Egypt and who knows what it means to cling on to the precious life we have been given.

As troubling as this story is, it tells us an amazing truth: God does not stand at a distance from us, but through the incarnation, Emmanuel, God with us, is here – is in Aleppo – is in all the places where people are living under fear and terror and God stands with us in the most intimate way. And this means that whatever 2017 may throw at us, God will be with us too. Whatever joys we have, Emmanuel is with us. Whatever pains we endure, God knows them

and feels them too. Even in the darkest of times, God is with us and promises to accompany us through all the fear, all the uncertainty, and all the violence and bring us into life abundant in Christ Jesus.

This is our Christmas joy and our hope for the new year and beyond.

Thanks be to God.