

Joseph's Family: Egyptian Refugees (Sermon for 30 December 2018)

Warmest congratulations this morning to George and Vicki Harvey who are celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary with us after the service with a delicious lunch downstairs. You might say, with George at one end of the sanctuary in the balcony working our sound system and Vicki in the organ loft at the other end, that they are pillars of our sanctuary who literally lift our eyes to God; and we are very grateful to them.

Speaking of the sanctuary, if someone interested in the history of our church asked me to describe the sanctuary here, I might relate to them how Ipswich church officials in the 18th century specifically denied the men of Essex permission to build a church, so the ladies of the church put their heads together and sponsored the construction of the church instead, the large vestry of which, where we have our coffee and our youth group used to play indoor hockey and gaga, was used as the town hall.

And how the sanctuary itself is in the classic congregational style, plain white, the seating split down the middle so that women could sit on one side and men on the other; plain window glass was used, which was considered as more theologically correct (and was also far less expensive to install); and we have a single pulpit, not a double one, to illustrate that the Bible is the center of the service.

Yet even though we worship in an historic building, it is the warmth and kindness of those within this space that often attracts people from various backgrounds to join us. All this is true about this place we call our sanctuary. And in churches around the world, you will find is that the sanctuary is the most important part of nearly every church building, no matter how different they may look.

But why is it called the sanctuary? What does the word mean? (Exploring the meaning of words, by the way, is a fault I have had since about the age of five, a habit with which my well-educated mother was pleased, until the day that I asked, “Mamma, what does 'pro-pro-promiscuous' mean?”, at which point I was simply handed the dictionary as she left to check on dinner.)

And like the word I was left to look up for myself, the word “sanctuary” has several different meanings. The Latin root is “sanctus”, which means “holy”, leading to the definition of a space set apart in a church building for worship.

Yet sanctuary can also mean a place of refuge and safety, as we see in the Old Testament, where all of these nuances seem to come together in Leviticus 19:33-34. There God abjures his people,

“When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.”

That God not only declares this to be his will, but follows it with the emphatic stamp of his signature, “I am Yahweh”--a name so holy and powerful that it could not be said aloud—shows that God means to be taken very seriously; for He Himself would become an alien in the land of Egypt.

Our Old Testament text this morning looks at a well-known alien in Egypt: Joseph, he of the famous Technicolor Dreamcoat. Because of his dream that foretold the upcoming famine in Egypt, Joseph had Pharaoh store tons and tons of grain ahead of time, and was promoted to the second most powerful person in the land. When his brothers had sought refuge from starvation by visiting Egypt, Joseph recognized them as the motley crew who had sold him into slavery years ago. But as far as they could

tell, Joseph seemed deeply moved to be reconciled with his family. When their father died, the brothers again became apprehensive; suppose Joseph's kindness was simply respect for their now dead father?

But Joseph had spiritual insight about how God moves through the creation as He brings it to its final fullness: "I am in the place of God; as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good."

(I will add parenthetically here that we have seen a recent example of the selfish intention of a man turned to good, when Jonah, God's own prophet, as Tim pointed out, tries to run from Him. Had Jonah not fled into a boat and the sea been churned up, the pagan sailors—who seemed like very decent fellows, seeking God for an answer about the storm and then very reluctant to throw Jonah overboard to his death—would not have come to worship the God of Israel—and through them, we can assume, others of their family and friends. So, even when we try to evade God's will, He has a way of getting us back on track. Not something I would recommend, however, as I can attest from personal experience.)

So moving from Joseph in Genesis (with a brief detour in Jonah) we now arrive in Bethlehem with the Holy family, headed by Joseph of Nazareth, the guardian of Christ. Like his famous ancestor, St. Joseph was also a prophetic dreamer; and when an angel from the Lord appeared a second time, he did not wait to travel in the safety of dawn, but obeyed the heavenly messenger, and fled immediately into the dead of night with Jesus and Mary.

For Herod, one of the most paranoid rulers in a Bible filled with them, was seeking to kill the Christ child to protect his political power. To make sure there was no mistake, he ordered all infant boys in tiny Bethlehem killed. Of course, it was Herod who was mistaken, thinking he could defeat God's plan of salvation; but the Slaughter of the Innocents, recognized by the church on December 28th, is a sober reminder that children around the world still suffer abuse in the midst of all the world's conflicts, near and far.

And as Joseph fled with his family, he was told to head toward Egypt, where God had prepared a place of refuge for him, just as God had for Joseph in Genesis centuries earlier. For Egypt was outside of Herod's legal jurisdiction. Depending on the route, scholars estimate that the travel—and travail—of the Holy Family could have been anywhere from a hundred to three hundred miles long, all on foot with a small child to coax along and care for. Yet God had provided the direction, and He also provide the means to follow that direction, with the wealth offered by the Wise Men from the East.

And though they were now aliens in a treacherous land, they had obeyed God's direction; and thus were in the safest place they could be. They were, in fact, in the sanctuary of the will of God—and Joseph Nazareth could tell his family, as did Joseph of Genesis, "Do not fear for [we] are in the place of God." Which takes us back to the very heart what sanctuary means: A place of holiness and of refuge.

But as we enter a new year, where can we find sanctuary in our own lives? Of course in our church; but during the week, Christ Himself shows us in Matthew's Gospel where we can find sanctuary in the will of God:

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did

we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these....you did it to me.’” (Matt. 25:34-40.)

In other words, we are to be active in Egypt: to reach out to the marginalized around us with the compassion of Christ—an especially appropriate reminder as we approach the season of Epiphany. It is there that we find the sanctuary of God; perhaps that is why what takes place in a sanctuary is called a service: for we are called to serve. But how?

The simplest way to find this out is to begin with who you are and where you are. I first learned this when I was a Congressional Liaison in Washington, D. C.; which sounds impressive, but less so when I mention that it was for a small agency within the Department of Agriculture. That was when thousand points of light theme in America encouraged volunteerism. So with high school students from the Future Farmers of America, I helped develop an outreach program for people with disabilities in rural areas—something I had personal insight about. By the time I left for seminary, we had Republican and Democratic legislators involved; and we raised nearly a half-million dollars in program donations.

In seminary, I studied to become a college chaplain, but when there were no openings, volunteering was again God's answer; I have been a student mentor at Gordon College for the last twenty years, where I learn more from students than they probably learn from me. And I am so deeply proud of them. One student, a close friend, graduated a few years ago and recently moved to Arizona. And even though he was trying to adjust to his own situation in an alien land, my friend looked for ways he could reach out in his own Egypt: After completing extensive paperwork and fingerprinting, he is now allowed to visit detainee centers for refugees awaiting asylum, which he does regularly, and share what he finds there with with people both in Arizona and back in Boston. Another close friend and former student has volunteered at Amirah House, a North Shore home helping abused women find new lives; and yet another, a journalist, writes free-lance articles on how the church can have an impact on social issues that involve the marginalized in our communities.

God has each of these young friends where he wants them to be; and God has you where you are for a reason, too, whether for days or for decades. Here we have the Open Door Ministry in Gloucester; and Family Promise where you can not only reach out to the homeless but get to know local folks from other churches. But let's move out a little further. Count up how many friends you have who go to church; and now count up the friends who do not. If you have far more in the former group than the latter, God may want to open up new opportunities for you this year. It could be as simply as joining a reading or writing group at the local library. If you are artistic, or think you are, check out local venues for artists, like the Hive in Gloucester.

And as you connect with your community outside of the church, you will find people needing the compassion of Christ all around us—just within our reach. So volunteer and reach: Because that is where, if I may use the word, the magic begins to kick in: Because when those who are hurting understand that you are reaching out to them because you care about them, and not because you are being paid to do so, you are giving them the gift of self-worth and dignity. Indeed, you are giving them the ability to see themselves as God sees them—because you see them with the eyes of Christ.

So as we step from 2018 into 2019, let us also step from this sanctuary, into the sanctuary of Egypt; where might God be leading you there? Wherever it is, we can know that we are all, like Joseph of Genesis and Joseph of Nazareth, aliens in Egypt—yet in the place of God.
