FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

January 1, 2023

*“Place of Safety”* Matthew 2:13-23

On this first day of the new year, the story from the Gospel of Matthew we just heard asks us a most important question. Matthew asks us to think and pray about: how goodness and righteousness survives in a world loaded to the brim with so many other concerns and priorities.

Matthew asks us to consider this by telling us a story of great drama, sadness, and triumph. He tells us of how one of the first experiences of Jesus’ life was when he and his parents became political refugees who were forced to leave their home and make the arduous journey to Egypt. Matthew asks us to think about where we look for a place of safety.

In the few verses we heard, two men—Joseph and Herod—are both given special insight into Jesus’ identity. For both, the information they are given affects them on a very personal level. Each will have to decide how they are going to respond to what God is doing in the world, and in each of their lives.

In the earlier part of the story, before the verses we heard just now, Joseph was visited by an angel who put his mind to rest about taking Mary to be his wife even though she was carrying a child that he knew was not his. It is important to notice that Joseph respected the angel messenger and was able to obey with an easy heart.

Here, in this morning’s story, Joseph is told again to take Mary and the child and flee to Egypt.

Let us think about this new thing he has been asked to do. Jesus is still an infant. Somehow, Mary and Jesus have survived childbirth far from home. Indeed, without female relatives to attend Mary as she gave birth, somehow both she and Jesus have survived. They have even survived the less-than-optimal surroundings of a stable instead of their own home, and a manger instead of a cradle.

Now, an angel was telling him to take the baby and his mother and travel all the way to Egypt, and to stay there indefinitely. Another long, strenuous journey. Moreover, Joseph was being told to go and live among strangers in a land from which the Jews still celebrate having escaped.

I can imagine Joseph being quite unsettled at the thought of going there…but that is what he did. Without knowing how he was going to feed and shelter them, he went. Joseph took his family to Egypt and made a life for them there until he was again visited in a dream by an angel telling him it was safe to return. Joseph listened to God’s desire for him and the family, and he obeyed.

As for Herod: he heard the news about Jesus and was thrown into a murderous panic. As Rome’s puppet king in Israel, Herod, instead of rejoicing at the news of that the Messiah had been born, received it as a personal threat to his power and authority. Instead of being surprised and grateful at what God was doing, Herod could only think of what he could do to frustrate and possibly even ruin God’s plan and purpose.

Herod’s deep desire to hang-on to his earthly power was so great that he compounded his evil in the most murderous way possible: by killing helpless infants.

The sad news is that, even though this all took place more than two thousand years ago, you and I know that this kind of savage, barbarous behavior is *not* something that has been relegated only to history, or to what we may consider a less sophisticated, less enlightened past.

What you and I know is that these things continue to happen. The lives of men and women and children are still threatened by the tyrants of the world. And the tyrants that perpetrate such atrocities are individuals like the ones pursuing wars for the sake of holding on to power, status, and wealth.

However, the bad news is that the tyrants in our midst can also be a lack of concern or commitment by good people to God’s love for all people.

We do not do it on purpose. Often, it is the result of living in a complex world—how did I put it a little earlier? “… a world loaded to the brim with so many other concerns and priorities.”

So, how do we know what to do?

Early last week, I saw something in the news that reminded me of this story. It happened in Buffalo, New York, just a few days ago during the blizzard that hit that part of the country just before Christmas.

A young woman and her family were hunkering down in their home while the wind howled, and the snow continued to pile up outside. On Christmas Eve, Sha’Kira Autry heard someone screaming for help outside in the snow. Despite the blizzard, she and her boyfriend went outside and found Joey White. He was lost and confused and in terrible pain from the frostbite that was developing on both his hands.

They carried him into their home and bundled him up. For more than two days, they fed and cared for him while they waited until an ambulance could get through to take him to the hospital.

In the Facebook livestream she made, Sha’Kira herself is distraught about the man and his condition. However, she is also determined to care for him and get him the medical care he needs. Over and over again, she declares, “This man *not* going to die on *my* watch!”

I know this is a small story—in the scheme of things—this is a very small story that we might be tempted to shrug-off. It is also a story where the concerns were obvious and the uncomplicated: one human being was in danger and needed help. Another human being was able to offer that help, and she did.

Still, what I am holding on to in their story, and what I am asking you to hold on to also is that in that story, Sha’Kira Autry was a “place of safety.” Her home was the location, but it was the woman herself, it was in her heart, *that* was where safety lived, and because of that, Joey White survived getting lost in a blizzard, and is on his way to recovery.

A “place of safety:” this is what we all want for ourselves and our loved ones. It is also what God asks us all to be for each other, for all of God’s beloved people.

The good news is that being a “place of safety” is sometimes going to be natural and obvious, like it was for Sha’Kira this past Christmas Eve. It is going to be as simple and obvious as a voice crying out in distress on a snowy day—sometimes it may be just that obvious.

Sometimes it will be neither obvious nor simple, *however*, the question does *not* change. God’s desire for us does *not* change.

No matter how complex the circumstances become, we are still supposed to ask ourselves how we can be a “place of safety” for those who are in need, and our good news is that even when the circumstances are complicated, even when they are confusing, we have God’s Holy Spirit to turn to for guidance. We have Jesus’ Advocate who can calm our confusion and fears, as she reminds us of the love of God that holds us all. God’s love which can make us strong enough—even to withstand the evil of tyrants, no matter what form they come in.

We also have each other. We can be a “place of safety”—each of us, and especially all of us together. Let us begin this new year knowing that here in this place, here in God’s love, we are safe. By being like Joseph who was obedient and who trusted God, and by being determined and compassionate like Sha’Kira Autry, we can be God’s “place of safety: in the world.

So, right now, I want you to turn to your neighbor on each side of you and in front and in back of you and to each of these people say, “Thank you for being a place of safety!”

Friends, “Thank you for being a place of safety!”

Let it be so. Amen.