

The Love of Christ

In 2004, Leslie and I were living in Alexandria, Virginia. Christmas Eve and Christmas day, we enjoyed a “colonial, Williamsburg” Christmas ensuring ourselves that we also enjoyed a “time out” from the news. Driving home the day after Christmas we started listening to the news and learned about the tsunami that had hit Phuket, Thailand, and the massive loss of lives. Our daughter, Kristen, was on vacation in Thailand, and arrived in Phuket on Christmas Day, with another couple, Erina, and Peter. Listening to the news we concluded Kristen, Erina, and Peter were most likely victims of the tsunami. As soon as we arrived home, we started making phone calls. Initially, we thought we our daughter was one of the many tsunami victims. Fortunately, the news was good. Kristen, Erina, and Peter had been advised to flee to the high ground where they spent the night! Earlier, Erina and Kristen were walking on the beach just before the tsunami struck, admiring how far the water had receded. Peter ran to them and firmly told them to run, NOW! For us an Angel had appeared. They were refugees who spent the night in the hills above the hotel but were spared a tragedy!

Have you ever had to flee? Was it during a vacation? A family situation? Traffic jams? One of my fears is driving to Seattle and suddenly I-5 has only one lane open, the arterials are clogged, there is nowhere to flee, and I was warned too late!!

On this Second Sunday after Christmas, Matthew recounts the narrow escape of Joseph, Mary, and the baby, Jesus to Egypt, when King Herod ordered the execution of all the babies in and around the area. As the Magi were coming from the east bearing gifts for the baby, they were warned about Herod. Joseph is warned in a dream by an Angel. An unknown number of innocent children are killed. Only one is known to get away.

While it may not be apparent, this is a story of God’s activity. It is a story about a baby, the infant, Jesus, who cannot be pictured as doing mighty deeds to save himself. In addition, it not a story about the heroic deeds of Joseph and Mary, but rather about their obedience to God. Herod is not killed, the baby Jesus is protected, and God’s purpose continues. In this story Jesus is passive and God is the hidden actor. Without God’s action God’s plan for salvation would have remained hidden. God’s plan for us receives grace through God’s son, Jesus Christ. The escape into Egypt can be considered divine intervention by God to ensure his love for us would continue and thrive.

What happened in Bethlehem was not an isolated incident and is like the story of Moses. Pharaoh worried that the Hebrew slaves were growing too numerous and so slaughtered innocent babies. Only the infant Moses escaped that time by way of a floating basket that carried him into Pharaoh’s own household.

In fleeing Bethlehem, Mary, Joseph, and their infant son became refugees. Their flight from power has become all too familiar in today’s world! Refugees from Syria are fleeing to countries in Europe searching for a new life with opportunity and security. Refugees are fleeing from countries in Central America hoping to enter the United

States. They are trying to find safety, security, and opportunity in our Country! Each Sunday during prayers Dale Ramerman asks for their protection and safety. Fr Dale Johnson has spent considerable time on our southern borders helping these refugees as they seek asylum in the United States. He is intimately familiar with refugees fleeing in the Middle East, from Iraq and Syria, often because of religious persecution.

If God is all present and all-powerful, why do all these terrible things happen? God has given us free will. However, God cannot give us, humans, both free will and, then, take away that free will. If God prevented the choices we make that lead to pain and suffering, then we would no longer be free! The limits of what God can do are not set by logic or arbitrary guidelines. The limit of what God can do is set by **love**. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son." God loves each of us unconditionally! God loves you...and you...and you...and you..., no matter who you are, what you have done, or how many times you have "stumbled". For God to love us God gave us free will and with that choice. Through our choices, or the choices of those in power, we can hurt each other, humiliate and criticize those who have different religious and political beliefs, ethnicity, race, or are from the "other" tribe! God created a world that when real love is an option pain and suffering are not only possible, but likely to occur.

Herod did not have the power to stop God's love or thwart God's plan. With their flight into Egypt, Jesus, who later teaches, "blessed are the poor", identifies himself with the poor and marginalized of this world. He was the exile, the migrant, the refugee. Therefore, feeding the hungry, providing clothing for the naked, and sheltering the homeless are things Christians do to share their love of Christ. Deacon Eric, in his sermon last Sunday, talked about the light of Christ, helping others and aiding the homeless.

If Herod's plan had worked, the joy of Christmas would have been snuffed out even as the light of Christ was coming into the world. And yet, while Herod could and did exercise his own will, he could not thwart the ultimate will of God. *When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead."* When Joseph learned Archelaus, Herod's son, was ruling over Judea, Joseph returned to Israel, went to Galilee, and ultimately Nazareth, a small, unimportant town where the family could grow and prosper.

While Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus suffered the hardship of exile, they also experienced the joy of coming home. The return in exile from Egypt reminds us that Christ also understands the need for celebration. We rejoice in God's blessing, in our hopes fulfilled, and to dance, laugh, and sing.

In Jeremiah, the message is we are God's family and God will never forget us. God knows our name and loves each of us unconditionally. Jeremiah talks about joy after sorrow, merriment after suffering, homecoming after exile, being found instead of lost. Paul tells us we have been chosen by God to be part of God's revelation. It is about

God's coming among us in Christ and our coming to faith in Christ that are all part of a great plan. We have been called as God's children to make known by word and example the forgiving, healing, and unifying love that is ours in Christ to all the world.

You may be breathing a sigh of relief that Christmas is over! No more shopping. No more parties. This afternoon, you're taking down the Christmas tree, putting the decorations in storage until next year, and just relaxing after a month of Holiday activities and looking forward to a normal routine. Bishop Rickel tells us that Christmas is more than a one-day event. Christmas is a season, not a day. It runs from December 25 to January 5, and then to the Feast of the Epiphany, the arrival of the Magi, the 6th of January, so enjoy it, keep celebrating.

Christmas is all about Christ arriving, Christ coming into our lives, coming into our world, incarnating love and kindness during our lives. I love the Hallmark Christmas movies. The plots are the same and predictable, the women are drop dead gorgeous, the men are tall, dark, and handsome, and everyone has beautiful, perfect teeth. It's almost as if the movies are sponsored by the American Dental Society!! However, I enjoy these movies because they're about love and kindness – love for each other, love for the dignity of our fellow humans, and a focus on treating each another with love, kindness, dignity, and respect.

In the words of Bishop Rickel, the gift we can hopefully carry with us all year round, the real hope in celebrating His birth each year is that we will realize that Christ comes to us not on just this one day but every day, in the people we meet, in our homes, at work, in our lives, on the street, on the highways, everywhere.

In closing, Christ has arrived. Use this Christmas season and the New Year to renew Christ in your life, to show your love for others in the same way that Christ shows His love for you. May this "spirit of Christmas" be with you in 2020 and beyond as each of us shows our love of Christ by sharing His love with our fellow human beings.

As we will also say in the Post Communion Prayer, *"Send us now into the world in peace, and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart; through Christ our Lord."*

Amen