

Sermon for Sunday, January 3, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

On the top left hand side of the bookcase in my living room
stands a small olive wood carving from East Jerusalem.

A woman sits on a donkey
cradling a baby;
a man stands beside her,
one hand on her back
and the other at her elbow,
steadying her and her precious cargo.

For more than a week now
the baby has been in the manger,
looked on by loving parents
and surrounded by shepherds.
And now the three wise men
have arrived to take their place

We know the story well, don't we,
the three wise men
traveling from the East
following a star
that they have been tracking since it first appeared.
And arriving at the place where the holy family is,
with their gifts of gold
and frankincense
and myrrh,
falling on their knees
to honor the baby Jesus.

But we sometimes miss
what came in between.
In between
the rising of the star
and the arrival
at the wise men.

“A cold coming we had of it,
 Just the worst time of the year
 For a journey, and such a long journey:
 The ways deep and the weather sharp,
 The very dead of winter.'
 And the camels galled, sorefooted, refractory,
 Lying down in the melting snow.”
 T.S. Eliot imagines the journey so vividly,
 but even he misses
 what comes in between.

A little surprising, really,
 seven verses of it
 after a mere seven words about his birth,
 seven verses
 about the visit
 to King Herod.
 When the wise men, expecting a new born prince,
 went to the palace
 and asked of the king,
 “Where is he?”

King Herod
 was not happy.
 He didn't know
 of any king;
 certainly he wasn't aware
 of having successfully fathered
 a newborn infant;
 this could only be
 a threat.
 A threat to his carefully constructed and managed kingdom,
 born and sustained
 by careful negotiations, better known as brown nosing
 with the apparently benevolent
 but notoriously ruthless
 Roman overlords.

Let alone the messengers.
 From the East, they were,

a places from which
no good had ever come
to the Jewish people,
not since the time
of the great forefathers.
First there had been the
Assyrians,
and then Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon
who had destroyed Jerusalem and the temple
and taken the bulk of the population
into exile.
And then Cyrus the Great of Persia
who conquered Babylon and allowed the Jewish people
to return from captivity,
but only as a vassal state.
No, no good
could come from the East.

But the king disguised all that,
instead
feigning interest and even a touch of reverence
with his honeyed words:
“Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so
that I may also go and pay him homage.”

And so they went, co-opted into espionage,
off to Bethlehem
which the chief priests and scribes had named
as the place
where the Messiah
would be born.

Having begun something
they could not have imagined.
A few
dangerous
words,
“Where is the child who has been born king?”

Words

that cost a village
its childhood,
and sent a baby and his parents
into exile.

Because you know the rest of the story,
the part
we don't read on Sundays
because it is too horrifying.
The wise men,
abandoning Herod's commission,
went home by another road,
and Herod,
infuriated and then enraged
by their treachery,
retaliated
by sending in soldiers to kill
any child of an age
that might allow them to be
the foretold
Messiah.

But Mary
and Joseph
and the baby
escaped,
warned by an angel,
driven out of their homeland
by an unjust government,
refugees,
those small olive wood figures
on my bookshelf.

This morning
I was reading the news online,
and nearly missed it:
the first known death of a refugee in Europe
in 2016.
A toddler,
just two years old,

drowned when the crowded dinghy he was traveling in slammed into rocks off Greece's Agathonisi island.

How quickly we forget.
It was only
four months ago
that the body of little Aylan Kurdi
washed up on a beach in Turkey
after the boat his family were traveling in
capsized,
and member of the press
took the photo
that shocked the world
and brought attention
to the refugee crisis.
And he was just one
of more than three and a half thousand people
reported to have died
trying to reach Europe from Syria and northern Africa
in 2015.

The response was immediate,
with a great outpouring of sympathy and money;
four months later
that image and the outpourings
have been eclipsed.

In part
it's simply the process of time
and the human tendency
to forget those things
that are not directly in front of us.
In part
it's been the effect of those seeking to make political capital
out of issues of security,
to play on our fears
and portray refugees
as a threat.

"Give me your tired, your poor,

Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”
says the inscription on the Statue of Liberty.
Instead we are overwhelmed
by a rhetoric of fear.

Four months ago
the refugee crisis
tore at our hearts
and the essence of our humanity.
Now it has been recast
as a political issue.

But as Christians,
we can't let that be the last word.
We follow a savior
who was himself a refugee,
a refugee
from the same sort of barbarity and danger
that the refugees flooding into Europe
are feeling today.

Over the Christmas period
I read an article
that talked about the ways in which
Christianity
has shaped the world we live in.
Not simply in terms of faith, as we understand it,
but in the whole of our public life.
The incarnation, Christ doing among us,
was a visible sign
of the love of God for each and every one of us,
as we hear in the gospel according to St John,
”For God so loved the world
that he gave his only begotten Son...”
God's love for us
gives us an intrinsic worth,
and with us, each and every human being.

That's why, in the baptismal covenant,
it asks us,
"Will you...respect the dignity of every human being?"

Every
human being.
People like us.
And people who are not like us.

Time and time and time again
in the first five books of the bible
the people of God
are called on, are commanded,
to love and to care for
the foreigners
in their midst.

And not just in the Old Testament.
Jesus himself told a story of the Son of Man, a term he often used of himself, coming in
glory,
saying to his faithful people,
"I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I
was a stranger and you welcomed me..."
And they will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you
food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a
stranger and welcomed you...? And he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you
did it to one of the least of these...you did it to me."

Or, as the epistle to the Hebrews put it,
"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained
angels without knowing it....[and] say with confidence,
'The Lord is my helper;
I will not be afraid.
What can anyone do to me?'"

Because yes,
there is always the possibility
that one of those refugees
might be a terrorist.
Might.

Or might not.
What is certain
is that many more refugees have died this last year
than have died in terrorist attacks.

But Jesus is clear,
that following him
involves taking risks.
It might indeed
be costly.
After all, it was he who said
“Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find
their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Yes, following Jesus might be hard;
yes, following Jesus might be costly,
but still, still we are called,
not to let fear drive us
but instead
to let love
be our guide.

Even if that means
risking death.

But the call is there.
To respond to every stranger,
respond to every refugee
as if it were
that woman
sitting on a donkey
cradling a baby,
the man standing beside her,
one hand on her back
and the other at her elbow,
steadying her and her precious cargo,
as if it were an angel,
as if it were Jesus himself.