

Texts: Isaiah 63:7-9; Psalm 148; Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23

I'll bet that this Gospel reading was not the Christmas story you hoped to hear this morning. Just last week we lit candles and sang Silent Night. We sang with the angels "Glory to God in the highest." We knelt with the shepherds and gazed at baby Jesus away in a manger, asleep on the hay.

Plus it's January 1, New Year's Day in our calendar. Like me, you probably spent at least part of this past week saying goodbye to 2016 and anticipating what 2017 will be like. Hoping and praying for a new year of new possibilities.

What a difference a week makes. The angels have gone back to heaven. The shepherds have gone back to the fields. Even the Wise Men have brought their extravagant gifts and then gone back to the East where they came from. Joseph, Mary and Jesus are by themselves.

But that doesn't mean everything is peaceful. Far from it. It's worth remembering that the Wise Men had first gone to Jerusalem to ask King Herod where they might find the King of the Jews because they figured that a king would be born in the city of the king, the place of power. Recall that Herod sent the Wise Men on to Bethlehem with instructions to let him know exactly where to find the holy family. Not so that he could pay homage, as he claimed, but so that he could eliminate the threat.

How quickly the tables turn. Herod sends soldiers to Bethlehem to kill all the baby boys in the region. Joseph learns of Herod's plan when an angel appears to him in a dream. Imagine the frenzy of activity – stuffing together whatever they could carry, hurrying down the street, out the main gate, and onto the road to Egypt. Trying not to call

attention to themselves. Imagine Mary exhausted, trying to keep the baby quiet. Imagine Joseph's heart clenching every time he sees a soldier.

It's about 100 miles from Bethlehem to the border of Egypt. It might take 4 days to walk that distance. Now imagine the family trying to make a life in a foreign land, trying to communicate in a foreign language, trying to get used to eating foreign food. Imagine them enduring the stares of their new neighbors because they don't dress like or speak like or look like Egyptians.

And then the most horrifying part of this story: Herod does send soldiers to Bethlehem, to kill all the baby boys under two years old. And we hear the echoes of their mothers' voices, wailing in grief and pain.

Twenty centuries have gone by since then. We want to think that civilization has progressed. But the strong still oppress the weak. Innocent people still pay with their lives when corrupt leaders want to consolidate their power. Twenty centuries after this story takes place, in a time when millions of people have fled their homes because of war and violence, it's worth remembering that Jesus spent a part of his childhood living as a refugee.

I was recently told that politics does not belong in church. I was told that I should not talk about the presidential election or public policy from the pulpit. I thoroughly disagree. And this morning's gospel passage is the reason why. Matthew doesn't allow us to lay aside the hard parts, the politics of his day. Matthew dares to see things as they are and still affirm that God is working.

Once Herod is dead, the angel comes to Joseph once again to let him know that the coast is clear. But it isn't quite. Herod's son, who inherited his father's ruthlessness and

violence, is now the ruler in Jerusalem. So once again, Joseph is warned by a dream and takes his family further north, to Nazareth in Galilee.

When we confess in our creeds that Jesus Christ was truly human and truly divine, we are making an audacious claim. We are making a claim that no other religion makes: that our God took on humanity in every way: skin, bones, blood, brain, intellect, abilities, emotions. We are making the claim that God entered human history as a human being; that God was born as a human baby into a human family, grew to manhood, lived, suffered and died.

The fancy theological term is “incarnation,” which comes from the Latin word “carne”, meaning “meat”, “flesh.” God in a physical body. But still God. The Hebrew word we use most often is Immanuel: God-with-us. Even in the worst of times. Even when it seems like everything is going downhill. Even in the messiness of our private lives and our shared public life.

Matthew the gospel writer dares to offer us hope in this Christmas story. The violent forces that threatened Jesus at the beginning of his life foreshadow the violent forces that will lead to his crucifixion. In today’s story, we see him delivered from death at the beginning of his life, just as we know from this side of Easter, that he will conquer death at the end.

The real promise of Christmas, this day and every day, is that nothing can defeat God’s promise of Immanuel. Nothing can separate us from God’s love. Nothing can overcome God’s plan of mercy and redemption.

I’m glad to see 2016 behind me. It was a year of loss and grief and way too much violence. The coming year promises to bring much change, as we inaugurate a new

president, and as we figure out how we live together as citizens of this nation and the world. Jesus does not promise to magically make everything ok. What Jesus gives us is the promise of God's care. What Jesus gives us is the promise of God's safety. What Jesus gives us is the promise of God's everlasting love.

Today we claim Christmas in a different way. Not with shepherds kneeling and cattle lowing and a choir of angels. Not in lights and candles and ornaments, even though all the decorations are still up. Today we claim Christmas simply and strongly in the face of all that confronts us. We claim the promise of Immanuel: God in our midst. God in our lives. God in our homes. God in our hearts. God who will never let us go. God who will bring us at last into everlasting life and peace.