

“Refuge”

Sermon, January 1, 2017

By Rev. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Isaiah 63:7-9

Matthew 2:13-23

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth shall change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea.”

These words of Psalm 46 speak of God as our safe place, our sanctuary. We all have our places of refuge. Even as a teenager I found refuge in the church of my childhood. I was a church mouse, and involved in activities there several times a week. My parents were not very churchy and would drop me off early or pick me up late according to their schedules. This was a time before people worried much what teenagers did unsupervised, and so I would spend my time walking through the different sections of our church. The oldest section had withstood a fire decades before, and when I stood in the staircase I could still smell smoke and burn in its walls. At certain times of the day I liked to stay in the sanctuary and lie down on a pew, feeling its polished wood beneath me. The pew would dependably hold me up while I bathed in the clear light from the windows shining down on me. Sometimes I would visit my first grade Sunday School classroom and remember the teacher who taught me, who was older than God but somehow still looked the same, year after year after year. Occasionally I would run into Big Ed, the sexton, while he was cleaning in the church. He was always friendly to me and never seemed to mind that I was haunting the church. Eventually I would head to the choir room, where I would hear voices starting to gather and the piano warming up, and would join my scheduled rehearsal awash in light, music and community.

And so during times of tumult in my teenage years, I knew I could go to that place of refuge. At the heart of my sense of safety there was a trust in God as my rock and salvation. So when the earth did change, and the mountains shook in the form of my mom's unemployment and depression, the church's presence reminded me that I would always be able to find my refuge in God-- even when I was far away from that particular building.

This is not to say I did not have moments when I questioned my faith or found trouble with the church. There were many years in which I questioned everything about the church and challenged much of what I was taught to believe about God and Jesus. And certainly we know of people who have found the same level of implicit trust in the church, and therefore God, who have had that trust betrayed by misconduct from church leaders. But a certain grace found me, in the gift of Jesus seeking me out. His presence in my life became a sanctuary I could carry with me-- even in those moments when I struggled with the church and the institutional faith. I felt Jesus and his love especially in my most troubled moments. Jesus offered me a home, a refuge, a sanctuary. When I think about the many other ways my life could have turned out in those troubled years, I sense the salvation in my relationship with Jesus at that time.

The early years for Jesus do not seem to offer any sense of refuge for this Christ-child and his parents. Following the visit by the magi, who came bearing gifts, Joseph has a dream that warns him to flee to Egypt with his family, for Herod's terror would threaten their family's safety. So Jesus spent his early life as a refugee with his parents, according to Matthew. Nadia Bolz-Weber, in her Twitter account, asked "Question: is there anything more dangerous to the vulnerable than a world leader with a fragile ego and lots of power?" For all those around Bethlehem, Herod was indeed very dangerous and even genocidal. Even Rachel, the matriarch of faith, was heard crying from her tomb for all these lost babies. Herod's actions evoke the mad attempts of Pharaoh at the time of Moses' birth, in the Exodus story, when he called for the slaughter of all Hebrew-born baby

boys. Both Moses and Jesus survived, and while Moses led the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt, Jesus had to flee *from* the Holy Land *to* Egypt for safety. Yet Jesus grew to also lead people to liberation, helping them find their sanctuary with God.

This story from Matthew is a story for our times. If we were not already aware of the plight of refugees, 2016 has had a way of opening our minds to this global experience. By the end of 2016, 5 million Syrians have fled their country, while another 6.1 million have been internally displaced in Syria. These are people without a home. We also have heard proposals to build a wall to keep our neighbors in countries south of the US from entering this country. In addition, a ban on Muslims entering the US has been tossed around. The Statue of Liberty, which once welcomed immigrants into the US, holds a plaque with these words by poet Emma Lazarus:

“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!”

Would the young child Jesus, traveling with his mother Mary and father Joseph, even be able to set foot in this country today if they were fleeing gang violence in Guatemala, or civil war in Syria, or simply looking for a decent way to provide for their family while leaving a country with little economic opportunity? I cannot say with confidence that the Holy Family could establish a home here.

But I look to the many faces of this congregation, and wonder if there is some glimpse of the Christ-child in you. This congregation is uniquely positioned to be a witness on immigration, and to shape a model response for it. We are a tapestry of many different kinds of threads, and together it makes a work of art. I imagine it is not always easy. Being together in

difference means that you do not always get your favorite choice in music, language, preaching style or food. It means your customs are not always honored. But it also means that our world becomes bigger when we come together, and not only that, but our understanding of who Jesus is becomes bigger when we the church are a more varied body of Christ. Some churches have decided with intentionality to become part of the New Sanctuary Movement, and host undocumented immigrants who are at risk for deportation. Houses of worship, like schools and hospitals, are considered “sensitive locations” by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, so therefore are exempt from raids except in extreme circumstances.

In our church, most of our immigrant members-- who I reckon are at least 40% of the congregation-- have the security of visas or green cards. But visas run out, or have limitations on employment, or no longer suit changed life situations, and people who were once secure in their lives here become very vulnerable. I am realizing my need to learn more about immigration law, especially in this new administration. The church should always be a safe and welcoming place-- a sanctuary--for vulnerable people. CoFIA, which works primarily with undocumented immigrants in our area, is in our prayers today, because one of their sites for meetings and meals has been closed due to fire code regulations. Situations like that, which are typical with old buildings, raise suspicions for the undocumented and for those who advocate for them, because any breach of code could result in their arrest and deportation.

Max Wang showed up at church last week to pick up his instrument, and we got to talking. Those of you who know Max know he is curious about just about everything, including religion. He did not grow up Christian but wanted to know what Christianity was about. Ours wasn't the only church he checked out when he first started visiting churches. He told me he showed up once with a drum at a Spanish speaking Roman Catholic church. It was clear when he walked into the room, he said, that he was neither Spanish speaking nor Roman Catholic. But he told the music

leader he would like to play drums with their band. The music leader looked suspiciously at him and dismissed him, saying they could not use him. But Max stayed around anyway, listening to them warm up. As he gained an ear for their sound, he asked again if he could play, saying “if you do not like the beat I offer, you can kick me out.” Max recalled what his teacher Michael Hinton said: “If you use your ears, and show you can listen with respect and honor the beat of your host, you will never be a stranger.” It was not long before the band became hosts to Max as they nodded approval to the beats he offered.

I imagine that Jesus, spending his earliest years in Egypt, grew knowing a little bit of what it meant to be a stranger. Perhaps that experience was foundational to his tendency, in his ministry, to reach out to strangers, to notice them and their stories and to offer some of his own. And yet while he carried that experience with him, he also carried a sense of God as his refuge-- something that would follow him wherever he went, so that he never had to be the stranger. Like a snail that carries its house on its back, Jesus carried a sense of sanctuary wherever he went, and could draw strength from it for himself, and also offer it to others. Whether he was challenging the Roman Empire, or questioning religious authorities, or facing his own risky sacrifices, he could always find his refuge in God.

I am not much of one for New Year’s resolutions. But as I look ahead toward our fresh, new year, I can imagine that God will be asking much of us. Let us support one another in creating a sense of sanctuary that is present here in this building, but that is also so much bigger than this building. May we, in our lives and in our welcome, reflect the refuge and strength that God offers. May we draw deeply from it as we need it for our own lives and for the world. In this sense of sanctuary, may we encounter Jesus in ways that call us not only to survive, but to live life abundantly. As much as we feel a sense of abundance, may we share it generously with a world in need, all to the glory of God. Amen.