

**“Seeking Peace” Rev. Beth Hennessy, Jan. 1, 2017**

**Our Gospel lesson today is a difficult one to hear. Especially, today, New Year’s Day, when we are focused on new year’s resolutions, fresh starts, and being grateful for making it through a difficult 2016. We are still basking in the glow of last week’s lesson – the writer of Luke has us in a cozy manger with angels singing, shepherds arriving and adorable sheep gathered around the new baby. God has come to be with us in the form of this beautiful child. Emmanuel, God, with us.**

**It’s a tranquil, joyous scene. As one commentator describes it, ‘the infant has just received extravagant gifts from exotic visitors. The meaning of his birth, the promise of his life seemed in that bright and shining moment, so momentous, so filled with hope.’**

**Today, the scenario is quite different. The author of Matthew has the young family terrified and on the run. “Joseph moves from promise to terror with the dreaming of one dream.” We can imagine how they must have felt. Hearts pounding with fear, frantically packing what they could in a short amount of time. Trying to escape before Herod’s forces caught up with them. The baby Jesus is starting his life as a refugee with an uncertain future. They are seeking refuge, seeking peace. And the innocents. Jesus and his parents flee to Egypt to the cries of the innocents. The ones unable to get away. The description of Rachel’s weeping, the wailing and loud lamentations of the parents seeing their children being murdered is haunting.**

**This story is one that has been repeated over and over throughout human history. Innocents being murdered, families fleeing for their lives as an oppressive regime bears down. Poland, Germany, El Salvador, Guatemala, Kosovo, Rwanda, Congo, Iraq, Syria...the list goes on and on. In this week’s *Time* magazine there is a profile of 4 Syrian mothers and their babies born in refugee camps. The photos of the mothers and their new babies bear a striking resemblance to Mary and the baby Jesus. These families also face an uncertain future. In fact, one of the mothers interviewed says that it is the uncertainty that is the worst...the waiting, the not knowing where they will end up.**

**So where is the hope? Where is the good news in this passage today? We, of course, do know that Mary, Joseph and Jesus are spared and make a new home in Nazareth. Like other refugee families there is no going back. After more moves, more fear, more uncertainty they finally settle in a new land. And just as God was present in the stable in the form of this new baby, born with so little, God is also present with the young refugee family fleeing for their lives. God is present in all human suffering, all human experience. God is even present in the death of the innocents. Rachel is a powerful representation of God weeping for her children. Rachel’s cries are the cries of God. God is present in human suffering, especially with those with the least power, the least voice, the most persecuted.**

**God is present in our experiences of life as well. God shares our joys and our sorrows, our challenges and uncertainties and our deepest grief. We are not alone.**

**Jesus, Emmanuel, is God with us.**

**But, as followers of Christ we are also challenged, called to look beyond ourselves. New Testament scholar Tom Troeger puts it this way: “ where there is violence and repression and terror, where there are refugees fleeing, needing protection, there are human beings in whom Christ is crying to us for protection.”**

**This a great challenge as we look to the new year – especially this year - when it seems we are surrounded more than ever with racism, intolerance, hate and fear. Where do we get the strength to answer this call? It can feel overwhelming to say the least.**

**As most of you know, my father was an American Baptist minister and I was ordained in the American Baptist church. One of my dad’s heroes was the great Baptist theologian Dr. Howard Thurman. I grew up hearing about him my whole life. I studied him in seminary. He was not only a great theologian but also a mystic. He had a profound impact on Dr. Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement. He wrote extensively on the connection between spiritual renewal and social change.**

**He believed in the power of community and the search for common ground. Dr. Robert Franklin has said Thurman “was ahead of his time. A 21<sup>st</sup> century theologian working in the 20<sup>th</sup> century”. Thurman was an advocate of non-violence and he believed in maintaining spiritual practices of prayer, meditation, singing, celebration, worship and silence. It is in these practices that we get our strength to do Christ’s work in the world, even under very challenging and sometimes horrific circumstances. I would also add that coming together as a community of Christ around the communion table strengthens and renews us to do his work in the world, while at the same time it fills us up with the peace we need for our own spirits and connects us with the presence of the Holy.**

**This is not work God expects us to do alone. Just as God is with us in our joys and sufferings, God is with us in our work for justice. God, through his son Jesus Christ, will give us the wisdom and the strength we need.**

**I’d like to close with the words of Howard Thurman from “The Mood of Christmas” –**

**“When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost, to heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry, to release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among people,  
To make music in the heart.”**

