

“The Refugee Christ”
Matthew 2:13-23
Rev. Leah Anderson Reed

Artist Olivia Joffrey shared an art piece this week called, “if Christmas cards were honest.” The picture is this beautiful graphic image of holly adorned holiday cards, beautiful red and green cursive script, framed with ribbons and bows. But inside they have a bit of a different message than what we’re all used to. “Midge got a D in chemistry. Bob’s back on the painkillers. We’re all happy Lori has a boyfriend, finally. Happy Holidays!” “Hayden totaled the car. Dad’s insecure about his job. The dog has diabetes. We’re all gluten free now. Happy new year!” Last one, “We argue too much. Mom feels slighted by her friends who go to Pilates without her. The twins have ADHD, but at least they can entertain each other. Merry Christmas!” The truth is always more interesting, isn’t it?

We don’t always like to lay the full story out on the table. Some things are just better left unsaid, right? If you grew up in the South, you were most likely taught, “if you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.” That’s not an inherently wrong message, that one phrase alone has probably held many marriages together over time. However, when it comes to the Christmas season, we get lulled into this festive trance, even in the church. We spend so much time and energy and effort attempting to perfect the season — the front door wreath needs a certain bow, the presents we give need to be “just right” for the person we love, we need coordinating ribbon for our wrapping paper, and the ratio of lights to ornaments for the tree needs to be just right. There are rituals and family traditions and pressure to make Christmas magical for our children. It’s beautiful, fun, busy, and nostalgic . . . It’s a LOT. And yet, Jesus was not born into a shiny perfect world. Nor did he come to make the world a shiny perfect place. In the midst of this festive trance, I wonder if we end up glossing over the truth about our world, our own circumstances, and certainly the context in which Jesus was born.

There’s no getting around this passage that we read in the Gospels this morning from

Matthew. There's no way of telling it that makes us feel cozy. There's no 30,000 ft. view that helps make this text palatable or easier to digest. The church has historically referred to this text from Matthew as, "the slaughter of innocents." We don't tell this dark side of the Nativity story, and we don't include this horror in local Christmas pageants. And yet, not to tell it is a deliberate choice to lean away from the fullness of the incarnation. Roger Nelson says that "the incarnation means God enters the world as it stands, not as we wish it to be."

This portion of Matthew's infancy narrative follows the departure of the magi to their own country. After the Magi leave, the Christmas story turns quickly. Joseph is warned in a nightmare, and the family flees to Egypt to escape Herod's violence. Herod is out to kill all the newborn boys, and what's even more terrifying is that he has the authority and the power and the means to do it. Can you imagine having an infant and hearing that message? It's enough to make anyone's palms sweat thinking about having to escape in time to protect your child from a literal monster. Joseph awakens to a frenzy of activity and sheer panic sets in of having to stuff and cram everything they own into bags, walking down the street and out the gate onto the main road to get to Egypt as fast as humanly possible. The baby is crying, Mary is probably beyond exhausted, Joseph's heart skipping beats every time he sees a soldier. But they do in fact escape. It's such an important reminder of how complex life is. From one angle we breathe a huge sigh of relief — Jesus survived! The Messiah has come. He's at risk but He manages to escape from the violent, evil rage of Herod. If only the story stopped there. The nightmare doesn't end as they arrive at their place of refuge to inconsolable mothers, they've now entered a land echoing with "wailing and loud lamentations." Our text says that Rachel wouldn't or couldn't be comforted. The loss and grief are just unspeakable. Inconsolable. Unfortunately, as is often the case, there are so many innocent bystanders who become victims instead of the intended target — Jesus. The losses are many, and they are horrific.

This month's Christian Century tells the story of Diane Latiker, a mother of eight who has built an unintentional memorial at the far south end of Chicago's Michigan avenue, 116 blocks

away from the Magnificent Mile. Diane wanted to do something to memorialize victims of gun violence in Chicago. She started stacking bricks in an alleyway, one brick for each child who was killed by gun violence, their names scribbled on the side in magic marker. It started as a handful of bricks, and now more than 600 stones line this alley. People stop to remember, to pray, and the site gradually grew to become a holy place where children were remembered. As we know, gun violence has officially surpassed car crashes as the leading cause of death for American children earlier in this decade. School shootings remain a recurring horror — even fifteen years after Sandy Hook. We have a uniquely American idolatry of gun ownership and it is costing us our children. How do we grapple with the slaughter of innocents? Do we just chalk it up to “this is part of life” in our culture? Do we try to sing louder than the cries of children and parents? Can we even dare to look for some glimpse of God in this world?

According to Matthew, Jesus starts his childhood as a refugee, fleeing from Judea to Egypt, then briefly from Egypt to Judea, and finally from Judea to Galilee. His early childhood gives witness to what is later recorded in his own words, “foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.” The infant Jesus had nowhere to lay His head from the day he was born. Jesus was a refugee. Jesus is a refugee.

Many churches in our nation are setting up their Nativity scenes a little differently this year. At Oak Lawn United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas, the church outdoor nativity shows a cage topped with razor wire and features a shopping cart and trash barrels. In a statement to news outlets, Rev. Rachel Griffin-Allison comments, “May this scene call us to make room — in our hearts, in our city, in our policies — for the Christ who comes as an unhoused immigrant child.” The church has been encouraging the public to drive by, taking photos of the display to reflect on how the story of Christ’s birth speaks into the urgent realities for immigrants in our country today. Another church in Illinois put up a nativity installation with no Mary, Joseph, or baby Jesus, replaced by a sign reading, “Due to ICE activity in our community, the holy family is in hiding.” Right here in our own state down the road in Charlotte, a church created a Nativity scene depicting

masked immigration agents with bulletproof vests and handcuffs hovering over the holy family. Advent's difficult history raises questions we must face as people who attempt to follow Jesus. There are mothers, who like Mary, cradle their screaming babies at night with a fear that they may never grow up. There are men, like Joseph, who are grabbing everything they own in the middle of the night fleeing their country out of fear that they may be killed. There are neighbors right here in our own community who are being taken off the street — in a lot of cases, because of the color of their skin — and thrown into detention centers without any due process of law.

Our CBF global mission partners Kim and Marc Wyatt are interfacing with case after case of neighbors coming into our country desperately needing a home. Roquia is a single young adult Afghan asylum-seeker. She followed immigration rules using the CBP app to reserve an appointment to meet with an immigration officer in September 2024. Following her interview she was detained. She was later relocated from California to Louisiana and placed in custody at the Southeast Louisiana Detention Center. Roquia has been held in detention awaiting an immigration court hearing for one full year. She speaks no English. For most of her imprisonment she has not had any contact with other Afghan women. Her brothers also reserved appointments to meet immigration officers. Each was detained for a few weeks and then released. They currently live in a Welcome House owned by a supporter. Thankfully with the help of an immigration attorney, and Marc and Kim's advocacy for her, Roquia was released from that detention center two weeks ago, and the Wyatts were on the plane ready to take her home.

I've been reminded of a line that has circulated from the Holocaust, a short poem said to have been scratched on a wall of a concentration camp by Jews who were hiding in the darkness: *"I believe in the sun even when it is not shining. I believe in love even when I don't feel it. I believe in God even when He is silent."* Whether those words were etched on a wall or carried in the heart, they express a truth the incarnation proclaims: the light of God does not wait for the darkness to clear. God joins us in it.

Most of you know that we have two little boys, one four-year-old, Jennings, and an 11-month-

old named Merritt. 5-8pm in our house is like the wild, wild west. No matter how much we plan and schedule, there's always uncharted territory every single night. A few months ago, in an attempt to save our sanity, Chad and I decided to start bathing the boys together. We needed to simplify our routine, and Merritt is now old enough that he can sit in the bathtub in his little seat, and Jennings loves having a playmate in the bathtub. Ever since starting this, I have always bathed Merritt first. He has an earlier bedtime and it just makes our whole routine a little easier. The most traumatic part of bath time is always the hair washing — if you know, you know. I'm sure there's some invention, or some technique that I don't know about that would make this easier on my children. But I just feel like they need to get used to water being in their face, so I just have them hold their little heads back and I try my best to not get water in their eyes. Despite my best efforts, soap and water usually get on their face and in their eyes at some point during the bath, and we all have VERY big feelings about that. I was bathing them the other night and I started noticing that before I would wash Merritt's hair, Jennings would reach out and put his little hand on Merritt's tummy. The first time he did it, I noticed it and thought, okay interesting. He's a toddler, I gave up trying to understand his behavior about 2 years ago. Night after night of this, I decided to ask Jennings why he was putting his hand on Merritt's tummy before I washed his hair. He said, "I don't want him to be scared of the water. If he feels my hand, he knows I'm there."

I don't pretend to be an expert on immigration law, or foreign policy. I try to stay educated on the ins-and-outs of what's happening at the border, and right here in our own community, as we do what we can to protect our neighbors from different countries. But what I do know is this: when we turn our backs on immigrants and refugees for any reason at all, we are not being faithful to the message of the Gospel. The Word-Made-Flesh built a fragile tent among us in this world. He came to us with a family who was escaping political violence. If we do not recognize Christ in the face of anyone who is oppressed, despondent, without hope, without shelter, without a place to call home, we have completely missed the point of the incarnation. The outlandish claim of the Gospel is that God became flesh not in the world of precious manger

scenes and shiny happy people, but in the world where dictators kill babies and parents are inconsolable. It's the great mystery of Christmas, that God doesn't rise above, shrug off, or whisk away from this world. But Jesus is born into the world as it stands — the world of corrupt leaders, school shootings, parents who bury children, and neighbors who are thrown into metal cages.

What would it be like if Joseph had a new dream? What would it be like if we collectively re-imagined Joseph's dream, and it's a world where — instead of having to flee — refugees could find true welcome and home. How would our Christmas carols sound if we spent our time and energy co-creating safety and belonging for anyone seeking to find it. We are the hand that reaches out to hold someone just so — for a split moment — they might not be afraid. Just so they'll know we're there. May it be so. Amen.