

Message: “Warned by God, They Fled (the immigrant Jesus)”

It’s only a few days after the glorious celebration of Christmas, and yet we feel caught up in the struggle, yet another crisis. We wonder how we find space to breathe when something always seems to go awry in our well-ordered existence.

When your world shatters, how do you stand? When you’re plunged underwater by news you can scarcely comprehend, let alone respond to, how do you take your next breath? When all your visions of a joyous tomorrow are removed by tragedy or denial, how do you put one foot in front of another?

This holiday season was ripped open by shootings and violence.

We watched in horror as well-armed individuals destroyed the comfort and joy of a quiet community, tipping the scales from hope to fear in a few moments of terror, a modern slaughter of the innocents.

The echoes from the weeping prophet Jeremiah are all too evident:

“Thus says the LORD: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more” (Jeremiah 31:15 NRSV).

It’s as if there’s no room for the message of Christmas, no room for Emmanuel, no room for grace, peace, love and joy in the world today. The world doesn’t want to step aside for a different message, a different hope. Any time we seek to follow an other-worldly power, the powers of this world step in to give their response. There’s no room, we’re told, for dissent from the social norms we’re living in these days. No room.

No room is, of course, a well-known theme of Christmas.

How many innkeepers over the years said, “There’s no room”?

How often have the holy couple gone door to door in the Las Posadas celebration, only to hear “no hay espacio (no room)” again and again? We know there was no room. We get it. It was a bad deal, a rough start for the little prince of peace.

But that is Luke’s story. We’re in Matthew this year. There’s no trip to Bethlehem in Matthew. There’s no busy town with a lack of space, no manger, no swaddling cloths, no “no room in the inn.”

Todd Agnew wrote a song called “No Room” which speaks to us:

There's no room... no room in the inn, / If you were someone important we might try to fit you in, / but there's no room in here for you. / There's no room... no room to lay your head, / If you were wealthy we might find you a bed, / but there's no room in here for you.¹

The song is a duet with Joy Whitlock. She's a singer, the innkeeper's wife. They sound like two tired service industry workers who don't have room in their busy lives for one more request, one more need to be filled. True to the legends, though, they offer a stable and a manger, and it “should be fine for your little baby.” So, a little compassion works its way through their weariness.

Compassion seems a rare thing these days. Oh, not among those we know and love. Compassion is everywhere for us. But on the world scene, on a global stage, compassion seems lacking. It's all about money and power, advantage, reputation and security. Cruelty, callousness and self-righteousness are on display all too often, no matter where we fall on the spectrum.

I think Matthew's story is also about the lack of room for this Messiah. It's about a world that's hostile to a different way of being, a different set of priorities, a broader view. From the beginning, the world seeks to have its way with God's plans for us.

Our narrative is a difficult one, but it's one we need to hear.

So, let me issue a parental advisory warning before you read the text: some scenes may be difficult for sensitive viewers.

Unlike Luke, Matthew never says, “There was no room for them.”

But it seems to be in every verse. There was no room for them in a world of violence and corruption. There was no room for them in a hometown ruled by a bloodthirsty tyrant. There was no room for them in a land that was a daily reminder of oppression, cruelty and suffering. There was no room for them in a new hometown that was out on the edge of where the “good people” they grew up with lived. There was no room for them, and the hearts and hands of those sent to end the hope of the innocent are as blood stained today as they were then. There's no room today, either.

¹ *No Room (The Innkeeper)* Todd Agnew Composer, October 2006, Ardent Records.

But God was, and is, determined to make room. At so many points in this event, it all could have come crashing down. There were those who could have said “no.” There were those who could have taken the lives of God’s holy family. It seemed such a fragile, delicate thing, but it was how God chose to work. And this was, and is, the world God chose to work in. God didn’t walk away and leave us to our own means.

Thanks be to God.

To say it’s a messy world is an understatement. But God sees it as a world worth saving. There’s a lot in this narrative we don’t understand, and Matthew doesn’t explain as he tells it.

Why not send all the families with children running for their lives? Why not throw a bubble of protection over the innocents who are slaughtered? Why does Jesus, of all children, grow up as an immigrant?

We can tie ourselves up in knots trying to explain, trying to answer for God’s actions. We can’t do it with the gospel narrative any more than we can do it with modern-day tragedies, natural disasters or human inhumanities.

So, if there aren’t answers here in this story in Matthew, what is there? Hope. Promise. A Savior. That’s what Matthew offers here. Not answers, not explanations. Just hope. The kind of hope which drives those seeking wisdom forward.

There’s a verse in the song “No Room” which is compelling.

A small opening, a grasping for hope. The innkeeper’s song powerfully depicts the burdens of living, but also a cry for help. Maybe it’s offhand. Maybe it’s done with a sneer, or worldly cynicism. But it is there.

*Cause I'm cold, and tired of working my whole life away, / Every hand,
needing one thing more, comes knocking at my door, / I got a hundred
people screaming out my name, and I can't care no more, / You come,
needing more when I got nothing, / What can you give me?
Can you save me?"*

To this plea Christ comes and answers “Yes!”

Let us pray ...

Matthew 2:13-23 (CEB)

When the magi had departed, an angel from the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him.” Joseph got up and, during the night, took the child and his mother to Egypt. He stayed there until Herod died. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: *I have called my son out of Egypt.*

When Herod knew the magi had fooled him, he grew very angry. He sent soldiers to kill all the children in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding territory who were two years old and younger, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. This fulfilled the word spoken through Jeremiah the prophet:

*A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and much grieving.
Rachel weeping for her children,
and she did not want to be comforted,
because they were no more.*

After King Herod died, an angel from the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt. “Get up,” the angel said, “and take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel. Those who were trying to kill the child are dead.” Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus ruled over Judea in place of his father Herod, Joseph was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he went to the area of Galilee. He settled in a city called Nazareth so that what was spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled: He will be called a Nazarene.