



01.04.26...Making Room, Refuge and Sanctuary | Matthew 2:1-18

Did we make room for Advent?

Advent has come to an end, our waiting has been fulfilled in the birth of the Christ child.

And yet, we still wait for Christ's return. I am not quite ready to let go of Advent.

And there is more for us to be shaped and formed by in Jesus' birth, especially the part when Joseph, Mary and Jesus must flee to Egypt.

I have served 22 ½ years in 7 different churches – the last 7 ½ years as the lead pastor; and I am grateful this situation that I am about to share with you happened only once. Because once was scary enough.

Before I continue, I want to offer a pastoral word of care. The story I'm about to share includes experiences of stalking and fear. I only share it because it connects deeply with today's scripture and theme of sanctuary.

So, if at any point you need to step out, stretch your legs, please know you are free to do so. Your well-being matters.

Keeping some details intentionally fuzzy, I was serving in a church when a man in the congregation – someone struggling with mental health challenges, began showing interest in me. At first it seemed harmless. But then it quickly crossed a line and then it crossed many.

He left messages on my phone, sent me texts, dropped off gifts at my workplace, then gifts at my home, notes and cards and flowers. It was too much.

Remember last week when I talked about “when a certain substance hits the fan?” I reached out to one of my trusted circle of five relationships outside the church I was serving.

Long story short, another one of those five went with me to the courthouse to set up a restraining order. It was broken more than once. One of the five, even offered to let me stay at her house.

But then the situation thankfully faded away. Nothing more happened.

A brief and intense season in my life where I needed to feel safe. I needed protection. I needed sanctuary.

I asked the leaders of that church to protect me but they failed to take action.

And years later, I learned this man had done the same thing to another woman in that same church before I ever arrived.

My story—on a small scale—and countless other stories on much larger scales—reflect a world marked by fear, violence, and times when we must take extra steps to protect ourselves.

Which brings us to today's text. This part of their story, of when Joseph, Mary, and Jesus must flee to Egypt, in the middle of the night, to escape Herod's violence.

It is an edgy and painful postscript to the Christmas story we often prefer not to tell.

It disrupts the sentimental version. It reminds us that danger, displacement, and fear are not footnotes to Jesus' birth, but central to it. Our Savior was also a king and a political exile and foreigner from birth. That's pretty heavy stuff.

Many of us carry heavy realities into this season: first responders who witness trauma daily, prolonged job loss, sudden separation from family due to incarceration, serious health concerns, death, radical immigration fears, divorce, addiction, and military service just to name a few.

Our text is a jarring and difficult reminder of the evil and violence that was in the world then, and a reminder it is still in our world now.

A reminder that we at times, we need sanctuary and refuge. And that God the Son experienced this deep need himself.

We celebrate the birth of Jesus.

I'm almost embarrassed to admit, that it was just last week, that I began to see Joseph, Mary and Jesus' experience as refugees—foreigners fleeing state-sponsored violence.

Seeing these realities in the Christmas story stopped me in my tracks, because it revealed how close God chose to come to death and exile.

In Advent, we often rush to the manger and then stop there. As if that was the end of the story.

But this realization reminded me that Jesus entered the world already marked by vulnerability and danger.

This realization reshaped how I hear the Christmas story, not as something distant and sentimental, but as a story that still echoes in our world today.

Jesus was born into a chaotic world. Yet still, he came. Born to die—yet still, he came. Driven by love for you and for me, he came.

We celebrate the tenderness of Christmas. But we must also bear witness to its harsh realities. And we are challenged to see where those same realities persist today.

The Gospel of Matthew grounds us firmly in the real world:

**“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod...”**

A real child. A real town. A real geographic region. A real tyrant and source of real danger. And real foreigners (the magi) who traveled a long distance to offer real gifts and real worship.

The magi were outsiders, foreigners too.

God met them in their ordinary work and invited them into something extraordinary—without revealing the full cost at the beginning.

God still does that. God still meets us in everyday life and calls us into actions with consequences we cannot fully foresee.

So, the question morphs a bit: **Are we willing to make room for God after Advent?**

Room to listen? Room to be redirected? Room to respond?

Herod hears about the newborn king and reacts out of fear. Fear of losing power. Fear of losing control. He manipulates. He deceives. But God intervenes. As one scholar puts it, “*Herod, the trickster, is tricked.*”

The magi meet the false king before they meet the true one. And later, Jesus will say, “*I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.*” With courage and integrity, they choose the truth. Their journey is redirected—and their lives are spared.

How might the Way, the Truth, and the Life sometimes want to redirect, guide, save us? And even require us to move against prevailing powers?

But then Herod’s fear turns violent. Power, like we know, when it is threatened, lashes out. And the most vulnerable suffer, the babies suffer.

Matthew tells us of grief so deep it continues to echo across time.

**“A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they were no more.”**

So much grief.

All this in an unsuccessful attempt to preserve power, unsuccessful attempt to kill the Messiah, an extreme example of how **“He came to what was his own, and his own people did not receive him.”** from the gospel of John.

This is not a story we rush past or ignore. It is not the part of the Christmas story we can afford to sanitize or cut out.

We need to hold on to it as a reminder that Jesus came into a world that needed saving—and still does.

When they reached their destination, we see in verse 10 the magi were overjoyed. They offered gifts fitting a king, they worshiped in reverence and deep awe and faith.

And we see this same theme in the stories of Elizabeth in welcoming Mary and the shepherds watching their flocks at night...joy is expressed when Jesus is found.

Joy rises when Jesus is found—but joy does not erase the world as it is. The same story that gives us songs and gifts and wonder also unfolds in a world marked by fear, violence, and suffering.

The magi rejoice, yes—but not in a painless world.

So, we do not skip over the hard parts of this story. We do not dismiss what makes us uncomfortable. We will grow in our ability to bear witness.

Instead, we lean on each other for courage to face it, and we lean on Christ.

We begin by telling the truth. We join the lament. We acknowledge suffering without rushing to easy answers. We pray. We sit in silence. We name loss.

We accompany those who grieve—especially those carrying invisible sorrow. We listen. We bring meals. We write notes. We pray. We show up trusting God will help us.

And we ask harder questions. Like what would it look like for us to respond to food insecurity and homelessness here in Buffalo?

What might it look like to create tangible refuge—through making and storing meal kits, shared space, or advocacy?

How might we continue to respond to what Susie and Kirk Wulf shared with us?

Because sanctuary is not only a physical place. It really starts as a spiritual posture, with our hearts opening and making room. It is a commitment. It is love made visible.

Our homes can become sanctuary. Our church can become sanctuary. Our workplaces and schools can become sanctuary.

People themselves—neighbors, friends, mentors—can become refuge, just as Elizabeth became refuge for Mary.

Jesus has walked through fear and hardship himself. And our good news is wherever Christ is present, shelter becomes sacred space.

So, I invite you to pray. And I invite you to dream. What might it look like for us to offer safety, welcome, and protection? What small, faithful steps might we take together?

Let's keep asking these kinds of questions and let us keep working to find answers.

May we be the kind of people who still make room for God and for those God loves.

May we be the kind of church that offers refuge and sanctuary to all. May we bear witness—to joy and to grief—with courage, compassion, and hope.

And may we be the people of God at BUMC who love the people Jesus loved...the stranger, the poor, the hungry and the homeless. Amen.

And now as we move into a Time of Reflection, here are two questions we can take to the Lord in prayer.

**Time of Reflection:**

1. Where in your life—or in our community—do you sense a need for sanctuary right now? And how might God be inviting you to help create or protect that refuge?
2. What fears or comforts might prevent us from fully making room for Advent? What might it look like to trust God enough to be redirected, like the magi, for the sake of love and justice?