

Refuge and Hospitality
Matthew 2:1-12
Colebrook Congregational Church
January 8, 2016 / Epiphany

[Opens with reading of *Refuge* by Anne Booth & illustrated by Sam Usher to the children]

The Story *Refuge* is a re-telling of the Christmas story and the events immediately following, from the point of view of the donkey. And it's central themes are alienation and having hope and faith in the safety of the future.

Traveling in ancient times was filled with dangers. Robbers and thugs waylaid people, there was constant uncertainty, and added to that was the arid environment of the Ancient Near East. The farther from the familiar one went, the greater the danger, because the farther from home they went, the more they become the stranger, the alien, the foreigner, out of place with their surroundings. Travelers were extremely vulnerable. They had no rights, no legal status, and were at the mercy of the residents of the land they found themselves in, with only the force of the customs of hospitality for protection.

Most nations in the ancient world regarded hospitality as one of their chief virtues. Guests, whether they are strangers, foreigners, friends, or even enemies, are honored, protected, and provided for by their hosts. Violating hospitality customs, by not providing them, or abusing them when given, was believed to result in some calamity happening to the land. And still not everyone was hospitable! In the Bible, for every act of kind hospitality towards a stranger, there seems to be an act of inhospitality. For every Good Samaritan saving a life, there is also a King David left hungry, risking a war.

The Law of Moses includes many provisions for providing relief to travelers and refugees passing through the Holy Land. For example, the type of wheat grown there is able to be eaten raw, so farmers are commanded not to harvest an entire field but to leave areas near roads and edges where travelers and others were able to take and immediately eat some wheat if they have need. These Laws that were meant to help foreigners were always enforced by the reminder: "For you were strangers in the land of Egypt," reminding them of that they were once the stranger and therefore know how it feels to be in the

margins and alienated.

In modern times, migrant workers, like the ancient travelers, are on the margins and are at the mercy of whomever they encounter. A friend of mine told me about how his aunt would frequently feed migrant workers at her table who were passing through town. He visited her often, and met many of these people, and noticed that they would leave “hobo signs” on her mailbox. Signs that let other migrants know that a kind lady lived there that would provide them with a meal. There are many of these hobo signs that warn of dangers and direct their fellows toward safety.

Can you imagine how much easier it would have been for Mary & Joseph & Jesus, and countless others, if they had hobo signs to aid them on their journey? They did not know where they would next sleep or next eat, if those they encounter would hold to the customs of hospitality or would rob them. Will they be accepted at the next town or will they be run out of it? All they had was their faith in God and hope.

So, what can we do today to let people know that we are hospitable? That we have the virtues of hospitality and hold to the spirit of its customs?

There are many ways, and here just a few. We can stand up for someone when we see them being targeted and alienated; not sitting idly by or turning a blind eye to that injustice. We can reach out to welcome newcomers, whether because of the currents of life or because of dangers in where they were from, and accepting them into our community. We can also reach out to those who are marginalized by parts of our society because of who they are; remembering Jesus' Commandment to Love our Neighbors did not include exceptions!

This is not something that we can think of only once and be done, it must be thought about all the time. How can we turn away a refugee or a person in need when the One in whom our faith is based was born of traveling parents in a stable; not a proper home or an inn; and then spent his childhood as a refugee in a foreign land, because he was targeted by a jealous and fearful authority. We should strive always to be hospitable towards anyone who is in

need of hospitality, be it a dire need or just a simple welcome.

The conclusion to the Letter to the Hebrews begins with a good warning to remember in this regard: Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer:

Loving God, as our savior was in need of refuge, may we always remember to be hospitable and give what is needed, as we are able, to those in need.

May we remember the plight of Jesus and His family, and let it encourage us to assist other travelers or refugees. And may we always be gracious hosts.

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

INTERCESSORY PRAYER

[PAUSE]

Loving God, we bring to You the prayers of our hearts, both silent and spoken, on behalf of ourselves and many others.

We thank You for the opportunities You give us to be Your instruments of love, for the blessings of our lives, and for those You have sent to aid us in our times of need.

We ask that You forgive us for our short-sightedness, our hardened hearts, and our complicity in things that hurt and abuse Your Creation. We ask that You shine Your light again this day, that we may see and follow Your path, and that we may have the opportunities to right any wrongs we have knowingly or unknowingly committed.

We offer prayers for our family and loved ones, for neighbors and strangers. Grant them health & wellness of mind, body, and spirit; peace and safety from all harm and conflicts worldwide; and for comfort for those who find themselves grieving because of senseless violence.

We pray for Your guidance in all that we do, and for Your strength of spirit to do what is right, and to act generously towards all, full of Christ's Love. May we also remember to be tolerant of those whose opinions are different from our own, seeking harmony in all relationships. And we ask that You make us instruments of Your Love in our community.

We especially pray for:

The family of Walter Hartmann, Eunice, Andy, and Gretchen.

Loving God, open our ears to hear your word and draw us closer to You, that we all may be one with You, as You are one with us in Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice.

May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service. For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.