

Streetsville United Church  
Sunday, December 29, 2019  
Rev. John Tapscott  
“CHRIST OUR REFUGE”

Matthew 2:13-15

This is the season for returns, especially of unwanted Christmas gifts. Costco is the second largest retailer in the world after Walmart. I read that Costco has one of the most generous return policies. You can return just about anything you buy there for a full refund. Of course, that policy is often abused. Here are some of the bizarre returns Costco has received - a used chicken coop, a selection of dead plants, a 10-year-old ping pong table that was falling apart, and a dried-up Christmas tree in the first week of January. Each of these customers got a full refund for their returned items. One lady returned an empty bottle of wine because, she said, “it gave her a headache.”

It happens in other stores as well. A manager for a Dollarama Store wrote that a customer returned two used AA batteries that had run out of power. Then there was the pet store that refunded a customer after they complained that the hamster they had purchased was “neither friendly nor cuddly.” Who expects a hamster to be “friendly and cuddly”?

This morning’s Bible passage from Matthew 2 is neither friendly nor cuddly. It shows a dark side of Christmas we don’t think about too much. It’s called the Flight to Egypt. No, not an airplane flight. It would have been a hasty flight on foot and donkey. After the wise men had left, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him.” That night they fled to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. God gave his Son refuge in Egypt for a time. He had to, otherwise Jesus would have been killed by Herod like the other boys in Bethlehem. His mission would have ended before it got started. After their return an angel warned Joseph again, telling him not to settle in Judea. It was just as dangerous under Archelaus as it had been under Herod. So they went north to Galilee and settled in Nazareth, which was a safe place for many years for the holy Family.

God gives us a refuge too, but not it’s not a physical place. It is a living person, his own dear Son. Jesus Christ is our refuge from the world’s powers and principalities. And we all need such refuge.

Certainly we humans are subject to political powers. King Herod in his rage would have destroyed the baby, the rival to his throne. And when he couldn’t, his fear drove him to destroy the young boys in Bethlehem. The wailing could have been heard for quite a distance I’m sure, maybe even miles away in Jerusalem.

The Holy Family was not the first refugee family on earth and they certainly weren't the last. When the family arrived in Egypt, they would have been welcomed by a Jewish community, apparently numbering a million people. Ironic perhaps, but at that time Egypt had become a safe place for Jewish people who were being persecuted and expelled from other countries.

Now we here in Canada live in a democracy with a charter of rights and freedoms. For the most part, we are fortunate, though even democratic governments may sometimes use powers wrongly against certain citizens. But in many countries today people are pressured and harassed and even killed by political powers. The number of refugees seeking safety world-wide is quite astonishing. Thousands have crossed the border into Canada from the U.S. at Quebec's Roxham Road. Now not all who claim to be victims of political persecution really are, but certainly some are. They look upon Canada as a refuge.

There are other kinds of powers and principalities which can be against us. There are diseases and disabilities of various kinds. There is poverty. Unemployment. Addiction. Sometimes the powers and principalities that attack us are spiritual in nature. Herod and his sons were evil because they allowed themselves to be controlled by the evil one.

The powers of evil can attack us too, leading us into temptation, and causing us to do those things we ought not to do. It's like we are controlled by a power that we can't resist. And we fall.

The power of fear can attack us. Fear can control our lives and our outlook to an extent that is not warranted by the facts. Fear can cause anxiety and depression and physical illnesses. Young people are especially vulnerable to being controlled and manipulated by fear.

And there is the power of death. Herod represented the Kingdom of death. Now was a good ruler in some ways. The economy was good under his kingship. Lots of construction going on. But negatively he ruled with an iron fist. He used the threat and reality of death against his subjects. We have seen how that worked out in Bethlehem. Thankfully we can trust that God took all those children immediately into heaven.

The power of death is a reality for all of us, no matter how it comes. It is the final enemy which threatens all good things, love and achievement and relationships. Death seems like the black hole of existence. It speaks to us of destruction and separation.

The truth is that we are all subject to the powers and principalities of this world. We all need a refuge, a safe place. And God has provided such a refuge for us. "Out of Egypt I called my Son." Jesus Christ is our refuge from the world's powers and principalities.

God gave his Son refuge for a time in order to give us a refuge forever. For a few years, Egypt was a refuge for the Holy family. Then Nazareth in Galilee was a refuge for Jesus as he grew. But gradually Jesus was exposed more fully to the world's powers and principalities. This was especially true after Jesus was baptized and God called him to begin his world saving mission. The number of safe places for Jesus diminished throughout his ministry. Capernaum was a refuge for Jesus during his Galilean ministry, but his hometown of Nazareth was not. Heavens, after he preached in the synagogue one Sabbath, the people tried but failed to hurl him off a cliff. Later

on Herod's son, Herod Antipas, sought to kill Jesus. And when Jesus finally went to the land of Judea, and the city of Jerusalem, well, we know what happened there. He walked right into the sharp teeth of the world's powers and principalities. All the forces of evil, wrapped in the guise of political power and religious righteousness, poured out their full force on Jesus. The One who was without sin was crucified on a rugged Cross as an outcast criminal. And Jesus cried out those haunting words from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" At the end there was no refuge and no place of safety for the Son of God.

But all this was necessary for our sake. This is what Jesus had to endure if he were to become our refuge from the powers and principalities. He endured the devil's attacks. He hungered. He was thirsty. He knew weakness. He was betrayed, cruelly beaten, abandoned by his friends. He was treated unjustly. He was spat upon, and crowned with thorns. He died on a cross and was buried. The Father allowed his precious, beloved Son to be exposed to all the powers and principalities of this world. But then the Father raised him from the dead on the third day. "Out of the tomb God called forth his Son." And now Jesus Christ is the ever-living Lord and Saviour of all. He is not only victor over the powers and principalities; he is the God-given refuge from them. Jesus Christ is our refuge from the world's powers and principalities. Truly, "He is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." He is the One we flee to. In him we find shelter and hope when the powers and principalities of the world come upon us with force. They may harm us, but they can no longer destroy us.

Think of all the ways Christ is our refuge. Jesus says, "Come unto me, all you are weary and heavily burdened and I will give you rest." "My son, my daughter, don't be afraid. Your sins are forgiven. There is no condemnation for those who live by faith in me." "You can do all things through me who gives you strength." "I will help you in times of hard testing for I have been tested and won the victory and my victory will be yours." "I am the light that shines for you in the dark world." "I am the way and the truth and the life." "I am the Good Shepherd who laid down my life for you. I drive away all the wolves that would snatch you from the Father's hand. Nothing can separate you from my love. My goodness and mercy shall follow you all your days and you shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, though they die, yet will they live..." "I will come again and make all things new. And the powers and principalities of this world will be put away forever."

It was Christmas Eve, but this was one of the worst Christmases Susan could remember. Her ex-husband had her children for Christmas day and she wouldn't see them until the 27<sup>th</sup>. Her mother had died eight months earlier and there would be an empty space at Christmas dinner and in her heart. The popular Christmas toy she had promised to get for her daughter had sold out before she could find it. She didn't mind working late on Christmas Eve because year end deadlines were approaching. At 6:30 she left her office and walked up a grade towards the bus stop. The north wind caught her breath and made her face sting. As she passed by a lighted church she heard Christmas music. "I don't have anywhere else to go," she thought. "I might as go in and warm up." As she slipped into a pew the warmth of the church caused her to take off her coat. She found herself singing a carol. Then she heard the words, "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given...and his Name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, the

Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.” The bread and cup came down her row and Susan reached for it, something she hadn’t done in a long time. Suddenly something was different. Things hadn’t changed outwardly, but she knew a peace she couldn’t explain. She sensed that all would be well at last. As Susan went out into the dark evening, the hill to the bus stop didn’t seem so steep. The Christmas lights seemed brighter. The wind had calmed. A dusting of snow made everything seem clean and fresh. And that’s how she felt, in her heart. That Christmas, Christ had become her refuge and strength.

Dear Christians, what a friend we have in Jesus. He is our refuge from the world’s powers and principalities. So let us, you and I, flee to him in faith. For he is our very present helper, our shield, our defender, and our Saviour.