

Sunday, January 14, 2018

Lake Jackson United Methodist Church

Pastor Jill Berquist

Second Sunday in Epiphany

Human Trafficking Awareness Sunday



Scripture Lesson:

Matthew 2:13-18 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Escape to Egypt

¹³Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord 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." ¹⁴Then Joseph^[a] got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

The Massacre of the Infants

¹⁶When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men,^[b] he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.^[c] ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸"A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."



Sermon: Things We Don't Want to Know

Our scripture story this week jumps backwards in time. Two weeks ago, we were all about the Wise Men's journey to see Jesus, and then last week, he was all grown up and age 30, getting baptized in the River Jordan by his cousin John and starting his ministry. Now, we back up and talk about Wise Men again, and the flight into Egypt. It's just how the scripture calendar worked out this year, so pardon the confusion. Do you remember how this story goes? The Wise Men stop to see Herod on the way to find the new King of the Jews, and he questions them about where and when the baby has been born, instructing them to come back and tell them what they find, so "he, too, can pay homage." Except the Wise Men are, well, wise, and they realize that's not really what old Herod is up to. To confirm their suspicions, an angel comes and warns them in a dream, so they decide to go to take a different route home.

My students have a term for the Wise Men's state of mind. It's term that started as an activist watch word intended to keep oppressed peoples on alert, but the expression has become common teen slang. These kids would say that our Wise Men are "woke." Woke, as in, so awake that they are hyper awake, can't go back to sleep, can't unsee what they've seen, or unknow what they know. To be "woke" means to be on alert, ready, so that nobody can pull one over on you, especially in issues of social justice, civil rights, and oppression. They admonish one another to "stay woke."

The **Urban Dictionary**, the ultimate internet source of definitions for contemporary expressions and slang (I consult it quite often so I know what my students are saying to me), The Urban Dictionary defines "stay woke"



this way: *“dereriving from “stay awake,” to stay woke is to keep informed of the ****storm going on around you in times of turmoil and conflict, specifically on occasions when the media is being heavily filtered- such as the events in Ferguson Missouri in August 2014.”*

Clearly, the birth of Jesus took place during one of those times of turmoil and conflict. It was real storm of political and social oppression. Happily, Joseph, too, was woke. And he, too, had a visit from an angel to help him stay woke. Watching and listening to the signs of the times, Joseph knew Bethlehem, in the shadow of the Herodium, was no safe place for the newborn Jesus, so he took Mary and the baby and fled to Egypt. I’m guessing the gold that was given them by the Wise Men helped finance the journey. They stayed in Egypt until the danger had passed, and then journeyed home to Nazareth, where he and Mary were able to raise Jesus in relative safety. A happy childhood. A nice story about keeping a child safe. Stay woke.

And then come the next verses in our story. Marilyn already read them to us this morning. The scripture says: ¹⁶ *When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men,^[b] he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under.* Let that sink in for a minute. Think of the infants you know. This portion of the scripture is subtitled, **“The Massacre of the Infants.”**

So, right on the heels of the beautiful birth story, another common narrative begins again—the narrative of the murder, exploitation, and denigration of children, women, and the poor which has been so much the story of the Bible up to this point, and which is still so much the story of



humankind. Christmas is clearly over, folks. Time to put away the twinkle lights and the mangers and, well, wake from our dreamy sleep. We've still a long way to go before we stomp out the evils of this world.

I'm going to tell you the truth. It was a rough week of study for me. This story, and the history I read that goes along with it, really got to me. And then, I had made the decision, weeks ago, to join the thousands of other churches across this country who have declared today **Human Trafficking Awareness Sunday**. The more I read, the more I talked with friends, especially those who know so much more about it than I do, the more discouraged and depressed I've become. I've spent a lot of time this week in prayer and tears.

I had really hoped, when I took this on, that I could do some reading, and present to you a bit about Human Trafficking, and then present some options for us to become involved, and then feel good about making a difference. But I'm not going to lie to you. This stuff is bad. It's complicated. It's a never ending vortex of evil. And really, there aren't a lot of options for remedies and fixes.

Let me give you just a few facts:

Human trafficking is modern-day slavery. It is especially scary because while traditional slavery in the United States and elsewhere in the world was visible, human trafficking is an invisible evil. It's hard to recognize. People aren't thrown in pits and lined up in chains and sold in the open marketplace where we can see the evil for what it is. These master criminals are smarter and trickier—they hide behind falsified



documents and language barriers and stolen visas. They force feed their captives methamphetamines and other cheap drugs so they can control them and blackmail them. They promise them a better life, bring them to a new country, and then strip them of identification documents and make them work off their debt for bringing them into the country—the debt they didn't know they had—in industries like domestic servitude, massage parlors, nail salons, migrant farm labor. Many times, these so-called professions are simply cover-ups, gateways for transporting these workers to other parts of the country where they are forced into more labor, if they are men, or become sex slaves, if they are women and, yes, children. They are rarely paid, and if they are, the wages are too low for existence, so they must continue to work for their criminal-masters, at a price—incurring more debt, more years of servitude. They are beaten and drugged and shamed and raped, and they are worked to death.

This happens all around the world. It happens to God's children in almost every country, whether it's first world or third world or somewhere in between. It happens in the fancy places where we vacation, and it happens in the poverty-stricken, war-torn countries we don't like to think about. In those countries, the dangers to children are especially high. Girls living in refugee camps are kidnapped on the way to the water source and sold into sex slavery. Little boys—little boys—are sold into war, used as human shields, or sent into battle with bombs strapped to their backs.

It is the massacre of the infants. The massacre of the infants and innocents.



No wonder Matthew tells us that *“A voice is heard in the desert—wailing and loud lamentation. [Our Biblical foremother] Rachel is weeping for her children, because they are no more.”*

It happens in countries all around God's creation.

It happens in Russia and Somalia and China and Syria and Sudan and Haiti and Great Britain and Norway.

It happens in the United States.

It happens in Florida.

It happened so much last year that Florida saw a 51% rise in incidences in one year. It happens so much in Florida that we are the third highest state for human slavery—just behind California and Texas. It happens wherever there are a great deal of sea ports—like in Miami. Or wherever there is a great need for migrant workers—like in Jackson County. Or wherever there is a large concentration of young people. Like in a college town. Like in Tallahassee. It happens in Tallahassee.

The United States federal government defines human trafficking as “the act of recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing, or obtaining a person for compelled labor or commercial sex acts through the use of force, fraud, or coercion.” It's a 150 billion dollar criminal industry that denies freedom to 20.9 million human beings in a year. 26% of those are children, and 55% are women and girls. 2-4 million persons are held in modern-day slavery in the United States in a year. Some of those who are



the most at risk in this country? Runaways, and LGBTQ+ youth who have been kicked out of the homes by parents who think they are an abomination to God.

Are you overwhelmed yet? Because I am. These are things I do not want to know. These are things I do not want to tell you. These are things that make me feel helpless to do God's work. What difference can I make? Where do I even start?

Honestly, I was tempted to not even preach this sermon. A lot of the members of our congregation were sick this week. I thought about preaching on loving one another and taking care of one another instead. Or maybe just repeating Christmas Eve. The candlelight service gave me good feels. I want to feel good in church.

Honestly. I cried a lot this week.

Because Psalm **82: 4** tells me to, *"Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked."*

And Proverbs **31: 8-9** tells me, *"Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and the needy."*

Oh, and I kind of like this scripture from Ezekiel **34: 16**, because listen to what it wants more to do to the captors: *"I will seek the lost, I will bring back the strayed, I will bind up the injured, I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy."*

Isaiah **58:6-7** asks: *"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?"*

And **Matthew 25:40**: *"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."*

Do you know what all these scriptures are telling me? They are telling me to stay woke. Like Joseph, like those Wise Men, like the prophets who went before them and the apostles afterwards, now that I've seen it, I can't turn away. I can't unsee or unknow. It's my Christian commission to keep my eyes open to evil, and to find ways to fight it, no matter how small I am or how insignificant I judge my own acts to be.

Now, friends, I'm not going to solve the evil that happens to 20.9 million people annually all by myself. Really, honestly, I'm not going to make much of a difference. And together, the people of Lake Jackson United Methodist Church are able to do great things for God, but it's going to take a mighty force of Spirit, and a mighty force of humanity, to turn this evil around. It's going to take churches taking stands and corporations and big business making changes and consumers making choices and governments making policies—and ours has, in the TVPA—the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, and it's going to take years of struggle and slow progress. But I want to be part of that progress, don't you?

So. Here's all we can do.

1. Pray
2. ∂ These items—and they are hard to find, and expensive—have been certified as being grown, picked, and processed in ways that give a fair wage and humane laboring conditions to the workers.

Maybe pick one or two—a fruit grown in Florida and a coffee grown overseas. I brought some fair-trade coffee in for you to sample this morning. The good news is that there are an abundance of places in Tallahassee that sell fair trade goods. Ask me, or Gerry, after church. By the way, I got this morning's fair trade coffee at the Walmart.

3. Speak up. Write a Senator, if that's your thing. And if you see something suspicious, report it to the hotline. If you don't know what looks suspicious or how to report, watch for my follow-up email.

Stay woke, friends. It's our calling as Christians. Stay woke, and do all the good you can.

Amen and Amen.