

**This sermon was delivered by Emily Richards, Director of Congregational Life of the First Unitarian-Universalist Society of Ithaca, NY at Sage Chapel on the Cornell campus December 23, 2025**

In the Christian texts there are only two places where the birth of Jesus is described. One is in the gospel of Luke, and the other in the gospel of Matthew, which we have heard a portion of both tonight.

And these two narratives have some pretty significant differences.

Luke has shepherds and Matthew the Magi, Luke a stable (or guest room if you want to get more literal about the translation) with Matthew placing the couple at a house in Bethlehem when the Magi arrived.

Today we weave these details together to create a familiar Christmas scene, a narrative that doesn't necessarily match the few sparse words that the ancient texts actually give us.

But, the most significant difference is in what comes next. What happens after the miracle.

Luke offers us a simple series of events. Joseph and Mary stay in Bethlehem for the time required by the law, presenting Jesus at the Temple in Jerusalem, and then return directly to Nazareth.

But in Matthew things are... Less simple.

The text continues after the departure of the Magi with these words

“Now 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.

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod.”

In the dead of night, trusting the words of a dream, the family rose, went out into the dark, and fled.

Why is it in our Christmas celebrations that we finish the story at the miracle of the birth? Why do we stop there? As if the birth of a child is the only important part. Not what happens next.

A sentiment that is reflected in this world that we live in where birth seems to be more important than the actual life lived.

It's unclear how old Jesus was at the point that the family fled. Perhaps he was just born that night, but it is more likely he was a toddler since the Magi had heard of the birth and came from the east, following the star, stopping first to speak with Herod, who was the ruler of Judea, before making their way to Bethlehem.

And when the decree came down from Herod to rid the town of the male children, it was all those under the age of two, for he had found out the exact time that the star appeared.

Imagine with me now the parents, who were undoubtedly frightened, and not a small, easily manageable infant, but a squirmy, demanding toddler. One who maybe they did their best not to wake as they scooped him up and carried him from the only home he had ever known into the cover of dark.

The journey to the edge of Egypt was 75-100 miles. Which doesn't sound far in today's terms, right? The distance from Ithaca to Rochester is a little under 90 miles. It would take just under two hours to get there if you were driving.

But walking it would have taken them several days to get to the border.

Can you imagine what they must have felt in that moment, and the days and weeks that followed? Fear certainly. Fear for themselves, for their child.

But also hope. Hope for safety. Hope for shelter. Hope for a future free from the violence from which they fled. It was hope that led them out into the night.

And let us be clear here, we are talking about a family fleeing political violence, a family that was forced to become refugees, making an arduous journey with a young child, because they had to. Hope was all they had to hold on to.

Suzanne Collins wrote “Hope is the only thing stronger than fear.”

And, no matter what angle I look at this story from each year, it always comes back to hope. Hope is what this story offers us. It’s why we gather in the dark and sing together and light our candles.

Regardless of whether this story really happened the way Matthew tells it, or whether it happened at all, it’s not hard to know that this story is true. It is a story that has been repeated throughout the ages.

It was 75-100 miles to the border of Egypt. And many historians believe that they wouldn’t have stopped there, that they would have continued on to Alexandria, which had a large Jewish population and would have offered greater safety. Or perhaps they settled in Memphis or another town or city, which was closer but more exposed. Regardless, that would make the journey now several hundred miles.

A journey that would take weeks, through some of the most inhospitable terrain in the area.

Of their journey J.A. Loarte wrote

“In that initial stage of the trip, they may very well have joined up with a small caravan, for it would have been almost impossible to travel that road

alone. The oppressive heat, lack of water, and danger of bandits, made it advisable not to cross the desert on their own.

The historian Plutarch writes that, in 155 B.C., Roman soldiers making the same trip to fight in Egypt were more fearful of the hardships to be faced in the desert than of the battles to be fought ahead.”

There is a lesson, a stark reminder of the vulnerability of that love born into the world, that we so often overlook each Christmas.

Instead we focus on the manger, the animals, the shepherds and the gifts.

The smiling mother and protective father. The angels overhead who trumpet the news.

But it was those same angels that warned the Magi of danger and told them to leave by another route. It was those same angels who came to Joseph in a dream and commanded him to take the mother and child and find asylum in a neighboring country.

They warned of danger, but they offered hope. Hope in the darkness, a light, a beacon, a promise of safety.

And I want to lift up again that the text tells us explicitly that they left in the night. There is no indication that they took the time to plan or pack, other than a few essentials, or say their goodbyes.

No, this is a family fleeing state violence in the cover of darkness, the very definition of a refugee.

In fact the Rev. Benjamin Cremer tells us that:

“The Greek verb *púyw* (*pheugō*) literally means to flee, to escape danger, the same root for the word fugitive. This is the language of refuge-seeking, not casual travel.”

These words were chosen with intention.

Matthew wants readers to see Jesus as entering into the lived experience of refugees and displaced people. And the understanding of this passage as Jesus becoming a refugee so that he might identify with the displaced goes all the way back to the writings of Augustine and Origen which span the 2nd to 5th centuries.

Of this passage Shelly Matthews wrote:

“It is hard to read this scripture passage this season.

“It is hard to read in a world in which the number of political refugees has reached into unprecedented heights; in which the number of children fleeing from what might be certain death in their own countries for the United States is paralyzing the system in place for dealing with such children; and in which hostility toward immigrants, including those seeking political asylum, is high — without coming face to face with the sobering fact: if Joseph had received the dream to leave his endangered village and take refuge in a foreign country with his family in global-political circumstances similar to our own, he would likely have been turned back at the border, told to wait it out and hope for the best in Bethlehem.”

She continues: “As conversations concerning the problem of immigration swirl around us, all those who identify as Christians, and who thus honor the Christ at the center of our faith, would do well to contemplate the following:

“The baby Jesus is saved from the wrath of Herod only because he and his family are able to cross a border.”

She wrote those words eleven years ago. I wonder what words she would use to describe the situation today.

This trip to Egypt wasn't a quick jaunt either, the family is believed to have stayed in Egypt for four years.

Four years in a place where they didn't know the culture or the language, for in Judea Aramaic was the common tongue but in Egypt it was Coptic. And although both were under the jurisdiction of Rome it was only the Roman officials who used Latin and Hebrew was used primarily in religious contexts.

Four years living as immigrants, four years caught in a liminal space, four years of holding onto hope.

Four years of waiting for a regime change.

I have to imagine that this experience must have had a profound effect on the family and the child. Research shows that the first five years of a child's life are the most formative.

So it is perhaps unsurprising that later in the Gospels of Matthew the adult Jesus preaches a sermon where he speaks the words:

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

He tells those gathered:

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I

was in prison and you came to visit me.

And when those assembled ask, when? When did we do these things? He replies:

“Whatever you did (did not do) to the least of these you did (did not do) to me.”

He is reminding us that every time we meet a stranger, a foreigner, a refugee, an immigrant, we are encountering the divine.

We are all made in the image of God, whatever that means to you.

To me it means love.

The teachings of Jesus continue to resonate down the ages because they are teachings of love and generosity and acceptance.

Teachings of peace and the yearning that we all have for a world in which these ideals are made manifest.

Jesus preached love. He preached about a God who is love.

A God who did not send their son to be born into a place of ease and safety, but instead decided to start that life with the experience of being the least among us.

Jesus said “let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds.”

The Christmas story reminds us that light shines brightest in the darkness.

It whispers, hope was born here tonight. Hope pulls us onward, even when we’re scared and uncertain, even when we are far from home, even when we don’t know what the future will bring.

That is what we are offered after the miracle. Hope.

So let us lift up a prayer. A prayer of hope, a prayer of love, for Jesus

reminds us that

“God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.”

Let us pray, not for miracles, but for the hope that  
walks with us into the night.

The hope that whispered in dreams to Joseph,  
that steadied Mary’s hands,  
that slept in the arms of a frightened family  
crossing a desert in the dark.

Hope that crosses borders.

Hope that welcomes the stranger.

Hope that chooses love over fear.

For hope was born into the world this night—  
and it is waiting for us to carry it forward.

May we do so with courage.

May we do so with love.