

Sermon: Lowly Things of This World

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Dec 24, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

According to the UNHCR, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, as of May 2023, more than 110 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide. That includes 35 million refugees, 63 million internally displaced people, 5 million asylum seekers, and another 5 million people in need of international protection. This total of 110 million individuals marks the largest ever single-year increase in forced displacement in the UNHCR's history. And just to give you a sense of proportion, 110 million people is more than the entire population of Germany.

Almost every region of the world is experiencing and contributing to this refugee crisis. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the East and Horn of Africa, and Great Lakes regions hosted nearly 20% of the global refugee population, with the recent conflict in Sudan adding more to the problem. In Central America and Venezuela, it is the increase in violence by organized criminal groups that is driving people out, to seek protection and better life elsewhere. The Syrian conflict, now reaching its 12th year in 2022 has displaced 13.5 million people, representing more than half of the country's total population. The Rohingya, a stateless Muslim minority in Myanmar, were forced out by the country's military regime, of 1.2 million of them, mostly elderly people, women, children, even newborn infants. The war in Ukraine, in its second year now, has displaced more than 5 million internally, with an additional 6.3 million externally.

I could go on, but of course, all of this is not even taking into account of what is happening inside the Gaza Strip, as the Israeli army is currently engaged in a full scale conflict against Hamas militants, with seemingly no regard to the plight of the civilian population within. 2023 has not been kind to the refugees of the world, and 2024 is not looking too bright.

Would it surprise or even offend you, if I should describe the Holy Family, of Mary, Joseph and infant Jesus, as just another refugee family? When we think of nativity scenes, we tend to romanticize the Holy Family, surrounded by angles and animals, in a cozy and comfortable stable. We might even think of shepherds or wise kings, as children dressed in

bathrobes or costumes with paper crowns. In fact, at the tail end of tonight's service, and with thanks to the creativity of many in St. Giles, we are putting together a Christmas Tableau, depicting precisely that nativity scene.

However, things were probably not quite so rosy. Mary and Joseph had probably more in common with today's refugees, forced by a heartless government, travelling to a foreign land, in a harsh and unyielding winter, all the while Mary was about to give birth. And for what, a census, really?

When they arrived at Bethlehem, there were no shelters nor government sponsored motels to welcome them. In fact, no vacancy signs were hung in front of every inns and guesthouses. No place for them to spend the night except in a stable, where they were to sleep with horses and animals. Homeless and dejected Mary and Joseph must've felt, yet the promise of Isaiah was true for them, as for others throughout time:

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.”

“For unto [them and unto] us a Child is born,
unto [them and unto] us a Son is given;
and the government will be upon His shoulder.
And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:2, 6)

Elsewhere in an open field, lowly shepherds were going about their chores. Nothing special about them, not their work nor their flock. Just another group of honest labourers toiling in their job, ready to call it a night. Then suddenly, there came a bright light! An angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of God shone upon them,

Of course they were terrified, but the angel comforted them and brought to them the good news of great joy: That the long awaited Messiah, from the line of David, in the city of David, has been born, and a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger shall be the sign. Just in case there be any doubt amongst these lowly shepherds, the heaven opened, and a multitude of heavenly host began praising God, saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!”

To which, these lowly shepherds dutifully went and sought out the child born in a lowly manger, to a homeless refugee family.

Why? Why would God do this, in such a way? Why fulfill the long awaited Messianic hope in such a low key way, through what really should be described as the **‘lowly things of this world’**? Why couldn’t the Messiah have been born a prince in a royal court? Why couldn’t the angel announce this glorious news to a group of esteemed elders and priests assembled in the vastly expanded Temple of Jerusalem? Of course God could’ve done that, but didn’t? Why was that?

Well, short of speculating on the mind of God, I will say it seems to be consistent with the way of God. Think about it, the Lord God we worship is the same God who called Abraham out of Ur, his home town, and made him a sojourner, a refugee really, to travel to a faraway land with a vague promise of being a blessing to all nations. This is the same God, who took Joseph, another refugee who was actually betrayed and sold by his own brothers, and made him a ruler in Egypt. Years later, his family found themselves to be economic refugees in Egypt, and were reconciled eventually to their long lost brother. Years after that, the Hebrew people were oppressed and later liberated from Egypt, they once again became refugees, wandering in the wilderness for 40 long years in search of the Promised Land. When God led them through Moses to the Promised Land, the people settled and built themselves kingdoms. They then experienced two huge waves of invasion first by the Assyrians and later the Babylonians, and the people were dragged off with hooks, deported to faraway lands.

Nonetheless, the prophetic hope articulated by successive prophets, of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and particularly of Isaiah continued to be held onto by the people of God:

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.”

Through it all, the God of Israel, our God, continues to deliver people from oppression, from slavery, from fiery furnace or from the lion's den. The Lord God we worship is known and loved for setting captive people free.

That is why the psalmist repeatedly urged the people of God to

'Sing to the Lord a new song!
Sing to the Lord, all the earth.
Sing to the Lord, bless His name;
Proclaim the good news of His salvation from day to day.
Declare His glory among the nations,
His wonders among all peoples.'" (Psalm 96:1-3)

That is why angels announced to the shepherds, and invited them (and us) to join in praising the Lord,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!"

For the coming of the Christ Child is God breaking into human history, and the proud shall be made humble, the mighty shall be put down, the rich shall be sent away empty, and the lowly, the lowly will finally be exalted.

So, as we gather and worship today for the coming of the Christ Child, with stories so familiar to us, we are again invited to reflect on the true meaning of Christmas. We again hold onto the promise that the God of sojourners, of exiles, of migrants and refugees still shines light in the darken corners of today's world. We again hold on to the hope that in time, God will make all things new.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.