



A SERMON

by Rev. Joann H. Lee: December 28, 2025



The first trip I took as a new mom was when our oldest was just 2 months old. And believe it or not, part of the reason I made that trip, from Minnesota to California, was to interview, here in person at Calvary. Mike was clerking for a judge at that time, and, as a government employee, hadn't accrued nearly enough vacation days to go with me the whole time, so I made the trip out alone.

Stroller, car seat, baby in a carrier, diaper bag with me, all the other luggage checked and on its way, this tiny new human and I took our first trip together—nearly 2000 miles across the country, landing at SFO without much of a hitch. It would be the first of many trips. In fact, that first year of Austin's life, he was on 25 different planes, traveling with me to meetings and conferences and to visit family and friends. It was mostly all domestic travel, but also to Hong Kong and back.

We were lucky that, for the most part, he was a good traveler, meaning he slept well in the baby carrier, and all he really needed was to be nursed and changed at the right times. Traveling with little ones, though, is always an added challenge, right? But it seemed worth it, and it seemed worthwhile at the time. That being said, we weren't fleeing from violence or for our lives. And we always had a place to call home, *even* when we were *changing* homes from St Paul to San Francisco.

So, it's hard for me to imagine the plight of the Holy Family, already in a liminal place in Bethlehem, right? That's not their home now. Then having to escape by night and in secret to Egypt.

Sadly, we know, however, that Jesus wasn't the *first* baby to flee violence and genocide, and he certainly wasn't the last. These past few years, I've found myself reading several memoirs and stories by Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees.

2025 marked the 50th anniversary of the fall of Saigon and the first Vietnamese refugees' arrival in the United States. I've read "Ma and Me" by Putsata Reang; "Owner of a Lonely Heart" by Beth Nguyen; "On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous" by Ocean Vuong; "Slow Noodles" by Chanthan Nguon ... And it helps me understand a bit, but if I'm honest, I'm too afraid to really put myself in their shoes.

As a mother of three, or just an empathetic human being, the horror and fear of running from home with my children feels too close and too scary and too heart-rending to allow myself to *truly* imagine it.

But that's privilege speaking, isn't it?

Because we know, parents have done it for millennia, and still today, parents run with their babies because staying most certainly means death.

Warsan Shire in their poem "Home" writes:

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well
your neighbors running faster than you
breath bloody in their throats...
you only leave home
when home won't let you stay...
you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land

Warsan Shire first began writing these words after visiting with young Somali refugees.

The poem reflects the choices refugees must often make and Shire's own disgust with the dehumanization of them in her own country of England. I first read these words in 2015 when the first stanza became a rally call for refugees and those advocating for them. And as my heart broke for Syrian mothers, carrying their infants across borders as they fled for their lives. What I *really* want is for tyrants like Herod to stop their

maniacal behavior. Their greed and hunger for power force people to flee their homes or sacrifice their children.

Erna Kim Hackett calls Herod, “an insecure leader who panders to empire and feigns interest in religion to try and secure his authority... Herod reveals how power twists a person, how it turns faith into theater and people into pawns.”

But we wouldn’t know anything about that, would we?

Friends, Herod is every leader who will do anything to amass more power and wealth. He’s the one redacting documents that implicate him in the harming of children. He’s the one demeaning any leader that has gone before him, or name-calling journalists doing their job. Herod is incapable of compassion or kindness, unless it is for his own benefit. Herod is a narcissist, obsessed with power. And anyone, even a newborn child, can be viewed as a threat.

I long for a world free of Herods. A world free of their fragile egos and petulant power struggles.

I am so tired of people dying, going hungry, and getting deported at the whims of these power-hungry, selfish leaders, and their pathetic grabs at any semblance for authority and control.

Enough already!

Mary sang of scattering the proud, sending the rich away empty, and toppling corrupt regimes while pregnant with the Christ child.

And her song continues today until the powerful are truly brought down, unable to ever again harm the most vulnerable and marginalized among us.

Our Advent theme this year was “Soon and very soon,” and indeed, that has been my prayer.

But until the day that prayer is fully realized, we are reminded by Rev Kim Hackett that:

“The (Christmas) story opens with a tyrant on a throne and the Creator in the arms of a refugee woman. Only one of them is worth following.

God shows up on the margins, not in the halls of power.”

It is worth noting then, that anywhere there is a Herod, God is with those who are oppressed by that Herod. Anywhere there is weeping due to the policies or executive orders of Herod, God is with those who weep.

Anytime someone must leave home in fear for their lives, God is with that weary traveler.

And not only is God *with* that traveler, but God *was*, and still *is*, that traveler.

That is the good news of the gospel. Hope and love are born in Bethlehem.

But they are not found in a palace or on the throne. They are found in a manger.

If the powerful didn’t have the ability to ruin and destroy the lives of so many, I would pity them.

Herod never got to see the baby Jesus, never got to experience the miracle of his birth, never got to be transformed and changed forever, like the shepherds and the magi who came and brought homage.

He never felt the joy of hope and love found at that manger. And he lived his life in fear and pathetic longing. I *almost* feel sorry for him, until I remember that he slaughtered the innocents and that his tyranny killed so many.

It’s true that God still *loves* the Herods of the world, but I confess it’s harder for me to do so.

And while God does indeed love all people, I believe God is not found in the Herods of the world.

Rather, God is found in the scared families fleeing their homes, seeking refuge in far away lands.

Pope Pius XII (12th) said in 1952:

“The Holy Family of Nazareth, fleeing into Egypt, is the archetype of every refugee family.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, living in exile in Egypt to escape the fury of an evil king, are, for all times and all places, the models and protectors of every migrant, alien and refugee...”⁽¹⁾

Friends, let us not be mistaken. God is not with the tyrants.

⁽¹⁾ Pope Pius XII, “Exsul Familia Nazarethana” (1952)

God is with the refugees and all those on the margins.

The Lord, Emmanuel, the Word made flesh, was a refugee himself, escaping to Egypt for fear of his life.

And every time we welcome the stranger or the immigrant, we welcome God.

That's why this sign on the front of our bulletin hangs outside the church today. Because we want to be a people who welcomes God among us. Every time we welcome the stranger or the immigrant, we welcome God. Every time we resist the powers and principalities that slaughter the innocents, be it in a school shooting, a detention center, or by public decree, we welcome God. Every time our choices reflect our hopes rather than our fears, we welcome God. Every time we put aside our ego and our selfish greed, we welcome God.

Friends, will we welcome God into our lives and into the world this day? Because *that's* what Christmas is about.

Meister Eckhart famously said, "What good is it to me if Christ was born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago if he is not born today in my own heart?"

May Jesus be born to us today.

May Jesus be born *in* us today.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer asks: Who among us will celebrate Christmas correctly? Whoever finally lays down all power, all honor, all reputation, all vanity, all arrogance, all individualism beside the manger..."

May it be so and may that be us today and every day forward. Amen.