

The Rev. Richard Schaper
 C Christmas II
 St. Stephen's, Belvedere
 January 3, 2016

The Anglican community of St. George's in Baghdad (where our John Busterud has worshipped) begins its Sunday Eucharist celebration with this invocation:

Allah hu ma'na wa Ruh al-Qudus--- Ma'na aithan.
 Which is Arabic for: God is here, and His Holy Spirit is here. Amen!

Not with Fear, but with Faith

Happy New Year!

The beginning of a new year brings with it the opportunity for making fresh choices. --Fresh choices for fresh life.

When Stacey Grossman left St. Stephen's to serve as Interim Rector at St. Timothy's in Danville, I reminded her of a plaque in the vestry there that worship leaders pass on their way into the sanctuary. It reads: "*Christian priest, celebrate this Eucharist as if it were your first. Celebrate this Eucharist as if it were your last. Celebrate this Eucharist as if it were your only.*"

What I wish for you this morning is this:

1. Live this year of 2016 as if it were your first—unencumbered with the past;
2. Live this year of 2016 as if it were your last—not neglecting what is most precious to you and what alone lasts forever.
3. Live this year of 2016 as if it were the only year that you had to live on earth before you return to heaven. (--Especially this last!)

We begin this new year together by sharing that portion of the Christmas story that depicts the Holy Family (Jesus, Mary and Joseph—did you think that was only an exclamation?) fleeing King Herod's threatened violence in Bethlehem to seek asylum aboard: in Egypt. This scene is depicted in the stark image on the front of this morning's worship bulletin with the Sphinx looming in the background. The same scene is portrayed on a large panel in the brass doors of our Grace Cathedral over the single-word caption: "REFUGEES."

Reflecting upon **the Holy Family as refugees fleeing violence in the Middle East—Herod's ethnic cleansing of Bethlehem**-- reminds us that as the year 2016 begins, the world has more people who have been uprooted by violence than at any time since the end of the Second World War. **How are we responding to this crisis: with fear? Or with faith?**

This Gospel story of Jesus as a refugee brought to my mind a memory from my early childhood of my mother in our kitchen at home reciting lines that she had memorized by heart as a school girl at PS 183 in Brooklyn, soon after she immigrated to this country from Germany:

"Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame, with conquering limbs astride from land to land"

She began. I had no idea where she was going with this but was impressed that she had memorized this.

"Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand" my mother went on,

*“A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame Is the imprisoned lightning,
and her name Mother of Exiles.”*

Do you recognize it yet? When you think you recognize it, signal by raising your hand.....

*“From her beacon-hand Glows world-wide welcome;
Her mild eyes command the air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep these ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she with silent lips.*

And then the portion I'm sure that you will recognize:

*"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

This is, of course, the Emma Lazarus poem that is inscribed on the pedestal of the Statute of Liberty in New York Harbor.

“Her name: Mother of exiles.” “Send these, the **homeless**, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

This declaration represents, I believe, **the best of America**.

In recent months we have heard some of **the worst of America**—the leading candidate for the Republican nomination impugning Mexicans as rapists and killers, and Muslims as terrorists upon whom we must slam shut our door. What a contrast with the words on the Statue of Liberty!

Ezra Lazarus' words of welcome to those seeking refuge from violence, poverty and oppression reflect the founding principles of our nation; but also our own earliest national history: Recall that the pilgrims came to these shores fleeing religious persecution in their English homeland-- seeking a religious freedom that—ironically—they were not ready to extend to others who would come after them. – (Roger Smith and his fellow Quakers were persecuted and banished.) In their own lack of tolerance, these Puritan Christian extremists had much in common with today's religious extremists in the Middle East.

Given our current national milieu, it is important that we remind ourselves both as Americans and as Christians that providing a welcome to the downtrodden represents not only founding national commitment but is also at the very heart of our Christian faith. For our Christian tradition is founded upon the same Semitic code of hospitality that we share with Jews and Muslims alike--our fellow “people of the Book.”

In the Hebrew scriptures; the book of Exodus:

"Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt.”

In Leviticus:

“The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt.” (Curiously, it says nothing about documented or undocumented...)

And today’s first reading from the prophet Jeremiah makes clear that those whom God gathers includes “the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together a great company....”

In 2015, the single country of Germany accepted one million refugees—far out America-ing America. In the aftermath of the mass shooting in San Bernadino, many people went out and bought a gun who had never owned a gun before. As Malcolm has noted, after every recent mass shooting in America—and you know how many there have been—there has been a surge in gun sales. Learning of these massacres, some people react by calling for stricter control of the availability of guns; but just as many other people react by feeling that they must arm themselves to protect themselves.

So, one reaction to the fear that these massacres incite in us is to reach for a **gun**. Another reaction to this fear is to reach for a **scapegoat**—someone we can blame, and hate. Hatred is how we express our fear. In the present instance, this scapegoat is not the Jews (as it has been often in the past), but rather the scapegoat is our Muslim neighbors. In recent months reported attacks on mosques and Muslims have increased three-fold.

The outrageous statements of the leading candidate for the Republican nomination for President has pricked and expressed the fears of many of our fellow citizens.

What shall we do with this fear? If we are honest, we must admit that this fear is not only in them; this fear is in us as well. How shall we handle this fear—that is around us, but that also is within us? A poignant recent opinion article in the New York Times titled, “How Terror Hardens Us,” comes to a trenchant conclusion.

The author of “ISIS: The State of Terror” concludes her piece with these two sentences:

*If we are to prevail in the war on terrorism, we need to remember that the freedoms we aspire to come with great responsibilities. And these responsibilities involve **not just fighting terrorists, but also MANAGING OUR OWN TERROR.** (Jessica Stern)*

The most important thing that we can do to manage our own terror to remind ourselves of our true source of security—which is not guns, but God. The limitless love of God for you—and for each person, no matter how different they may seem from us—is the ground of our security and of our salvation.

Our security, that is, lies in what we have in common with other people—ALL other people—not in what makes us different.

In December a faculty member of a church-related college in Michigan was relieved of her duties after it was reported that in a religious studies class she had implied that Christians and Muslims worship the same God.

Do we? Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God? This is a serious question. I ask you:--If there is only one God, and we both worship God.... You must draw your own conclusions. (That this particular dismissed professor had dark skin already made her—in the eye of some people—suspiciously “Other.”)

If it is true—as Christian theologians have unanimously maintained throughout history—that God is beyond all our categories of thought, why should some faithful people be threatened to learn that: God is not Episcopalian? Episcopalian is how we **worship** God. Episcopalian is not God. *The Book of*

Common Prayer was constructed by fallible but inspired human beings such as ourselves; and it has proven to be a reliable guide to prayer for many people for a long time—but it is not God’s prayer book. That other people worship God in other ways is no threat to the way that I—or we—worship God. If they draw closer to the God of love by other means—by prostrating themselves five times a day or by yoga-- I say: more power to them. (But see what I have found in Jesus Christ!)

At an interfaith forum at Grace Cathedral, a visiting Buddhist monk once teased Dean Barlett: “Since you are a Christian, you have to try to make me into one!” “No,” Dean Barlett responded with a smile, “Because I am a Christian, I have to see Christ in you.”

The late renowned scholar of world religions, Houston Smith, who concluded his illustrious career at Berkeley, wisely observed that a religion should be judged on the basis of its best proponents—not its worst. As we would not have Christians like ourselves and Christianity to be judged on the basis of Ku Klux Klan terrorism, so Muslims and Islam should not be judged on the basis of ISIS terrorism. Both the Ku Klux Klan and ISIS constitute a similarly marginal but highly visible minority which succeed by sowing terror.

Not with fear but with faith, is how we want to enter this new year. This is the meaning of Christmas, of the birth of the one whom we recognize as the Prince of Peace.

In a few moments each person present, whoever you may be, will be invited to the Table—which as we have been aptly reminded, is the Table not of the Church but of the Lord, where all are welcome.

Perhaps we should inscribe this on the pedestal of the altar table: “Come unto me, all you who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take up my yoke and learn of me. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Fellow pilgrims, we have found a refuge. Let us not fail to share it respectfully with others.

“Allah Akbar”—God is great-- indeed!