

WELCOMING JESUS

By the Rev. Elizabeth Hazel

Did you know Jesus was a refugee? Like many immigrants today, his parents pulled up stakes and took Jesus to a new country to keep him safe. It's all told in one of the most popular passages in Scripture which we will all hear in a few months. How King Herod was afraid Jesus might take the throne when he grew up—so afraid that he had all the Hebrew children of Jesus's age killed in and around Bethlehem. But warned in a vision, Jesus's family took him away to Egypt (Matthew 2: 1-15).

So today, many of the refugees at the border are children or families with children fleeing for their safety and gangs that would literally torture or kill them in front of their parents to get money. I think sometimes we hear about these gangs and confuse the refugees with the gangs because unscrupulous people get parents that are terrified for the children's lives to pay them their life savings or whatever they can scrape together to get them to the United States and safety. On their way here they get used, sometimes again and again, sometimes to the point where unscrupulous people actually show them the wrong place to enter our country. And sometimes I think we forget that our Bible, both Old Testament and New Testament asks us to welcome in the immigrant and be good to the stranger in our midst—not compound the injury caused by the vicious people who have already used them or hurt them. Then, too, if we welcome them into our communities, those gangland people would have no more hold on them--our own Wisconsin churches like Janesville and Sheboygan and River Falls call tell you stories about the resettling of refugees and their heart-breaking hunger to give back to the community that did so much to help them.

So God let that part of God's self called Jesus be completely helpless and dependent on the love and welcome of the people around him. If people like us had not welcomed Jesus the Refugee, we would not have had the Son of God grow into adulthood and grace earthly life even for those 30 plus years.

Jesus's life was an invitation in which, time after time, he asks us to welcome the vulnerable. A good example is Jesus saying, "Let the little children come to me"(Luke 18: 16). Children did not have the high respect in his time as they do now, that's why the disciples were shooing away the parents who came with their infants so that he might touch them. Children were only important in Jesus day because they would someday become adults. Children were supposed to stay away from Rabbi's especially when they were seated, getting ready to speak. And here we are again, even today, showing disrespect for children, especially if those children belong to a certain group of people. Linda Zuba, a human rights and advocacy attorney from Rockford has Border stories about what happens to immigrant families on the Border, where children are detained in rooms that are too cold and if they complain, the heat is turned down further and they are called degrading names. And this is the least of Linda's stories, some of which would curl your hair.

Again, Jesus's whole life invites us to welcome in the stranger and those who are vulnerable--because you don't know whether the stranger, the most vulnerable person standing before you could be *God*.

Matthew 25:35—"I was a stranger and you welcomed me." But not only Jesus, but many people in the Bible found themselves strangers in a strange land, for many ancient Jews were nomads. Abraham, Moses, Joseph, the 12 tribes especially found themselves having to make do in a foreign land or wandering in the wilderness, looking for a new home. God took care of those migrants over and over again in the Old Testament. And once they had a place to settle, God says "You were once stranger in a strange land and I took care of you so take care of the strangers in your midst."

Has there ever been a time when you felt like a stranger? It might have been when you were the new kid on the block or went to a new school. Do you remember how you felt? Some folk might not have been as friendly to you as those they knew well, the things you said seemed to draw less response or were put down more quickly than others, you saw all around you people invited to do things you're not asked to do or getting in groups to which you are not invited, in little ways you felt treated as you don't matter as much as the people around you. You know how frustrating that is until you become part of the group or more like the rest. But some people are treated permanently like the new kid on the block—that in its most mild form is prejudice. But prejudice often goes much, much further than that. Suppose you were treated as if it didn't matter whether you lived or died, it didn't matter whether your children lived or died, it didn't matter if you starved, it didn't matter whether your children got the nutrition they need, it didn't even matter if you were tortured, in fact the world would be better without you, and then suppose you came across people who actually acted to make these terrible things happen, how would you feel? Many is the immigrant who lives with that every day. And that's why God calls upon us to turn that around. I, for one, would not want anyone to feel like that for one second, would you? So let us answer God's call to heal as Jesus would. And sometimes there's a miracle hidden in answering God's call to welcome the stranger-- the person who is not like us--even if it means learning unfamiliar ways to communicate, for when God opens our eyes to see in people value we never knew existed, God also makes us more aware of something worthwhile in the things we look down upon in ourselves. That's when we realize that God really is at work in the world.