**12-29-19 (Sunday after Christmas)**

 **Where do we go from here?**

**By Rev. Sheryl Stewart**

Isaiah 63: 7-9 Hebrews 2: 10-18 Matthew 2: 13-23

RR: Psalm 148

**Summary: The holy family escapes into Egypt and will return to Nazareth; for Jesus, every step after Bethlehem leads closer to the Cross. For us, every step after Jesus leads closer to God.**

 We decided to light the Christ candle on our advent wreath on this Sunday after Christmas since we didn’t have a Christmas Eve or Christmas Day service. That gives me a great opportunity to continue the Christmas theme and ask: “Where do we go from here?”

 The church year and lectionary are designed to repeat the journey from Bethlehem to Gethsemane, from the Star to the Cross. That terrible story about King Herod’s massacre of all those innocent children in the hopes of eliminating Jesus provides the context for the holy family’s desperate, nighttime escape to Egypt. Like most Jews, Herod anticipated God’s Messiah to be a conquering hero like King David; so, Jesus was a threat to his power. Herod treated his own children this way – as potential usurpers – as soon as they were old enough to fight. In fact, there was a Jewish proverb in those days: “It is safer to be Herod’s pig, than Herod’s son.”

 Worldly power, political or economic, is selfish; if power cannot identify itself as the living God – as the Roman emperors did – the goal will be to erase anyone or ethnically cleanse any people too close to the divine. This is a pattern which has applied throughout history and which remains valid. Every step Jesus took brought Him closer to a moment when power, both Jewish and Gentile, would consider His death a “final solution” for their fear.

 Those who followed Jesus found the same sort of persecution, at first. I find it very grim that as soon as Christians could claim a Christian empire with some validity, those who were persecuted began to deal in crusade and war, thinking they were “fighting the good fight.”

 No, that was not following Jesus. He not only stopped his disciples from using the sword to defend Him at Gethsemane, but He healed a wounded slave who was arresting Him! Every step Jesus takes brings Him nearer the Cross. For those who follow Him, each faithful step is closer to God.

 I had to qualify this, saying:” Every faithful step.” It was not faithful to deny Jesus, as Peter did. It was not faithful to run away and hide behind locked doors, as they all did. Nonetheless, although they were shaken, when they took heart, their hearts were in accord with Jesus. They did not go to war against Rome or purge the Pharisees and Sadducees; instead, they witnessed to the Gospel, the good news of God’s love.

 So, if faith leads any man, woman, or nation to despise, erase, persecute, or use force against anyone or any group – even if they want to arrest us and lead us to our own crosses – that will not be Christian faith. Where do we go from here? Our steps follow the Prince of Peace. Our steps witness to the love and power of God. All other steps are wandering without aim or running away from Jesus

In a democracy, we have a special responsibility and accountability or the steps we take or do not take. Let’s take heart – the Heart of Jesus, -- and so be close to the heart of God until He comes again to rule the world.