

I would like to begin this morning with a few personal remarks. Given that this is my first official visitation to St Luke's in the Meadow, I would like to express my gratitude for the privilege of serving as your bishop. It is an honor to serve a diocese such as this one, with faithful, courageous, and dedicated Christians such as yourselves.

I would like to thank you for your service and your desire to serve God in and through the Episcopal Church. You make a difference to the diocese, this city, and to one another. On behalf of my staff and the rest of the diocese, thank you for being such gracious hosts for our diocesan office. Thank you for the way you initiated -- and now host -- the East Fort Worth Deanery ministry called "4 Saints Episcopal Food Pantry," for the way you have embraced ministry in your neighborhood and your deepening engagement with your neighbors. I would like to recognize and express gratitude to the President of the Board for the "4 Saints Food Pantry" – Patti Callahan.

And finally, I would like to recognize and publicly thank your priest, Mother Karen Calafat, for her leadership, pastoral care, and sacrificial service with you, as well as her various contributions to our diocesan life.

Today in the life of St Luke's in the Meadow we celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism as one "adult" child of God is grafted into the Body of Christ as a living member of the Body. And we celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation as two Christians are received into the Episcopal Church, and one reaffirms their faith.

I would like to note that the celebration of Confirmation tends to be a time to acknowledge our gratitude for the Episcopal Church, and maybe even confess our pride in it. Certainly, we are not perfect – nor even close to perfection. But, we are drawn to a particular way of being Christians, and we believe we have a distinctive and important voice and presence within the Christian family. I'll say more about that momentarily.

Every time we celebrate Baptism or Confirmation we say together the Baptismal Covenant, reminding ourselves that we are called into this Body for a purpose beyond ourselves. The Catechism in the back of our Prayer Book states: "The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ." So, we are called to participate in God's mission to restore humankind to

union – or communion – with God and one another. And we do that as we proclaim and embody the Good News of God’s love for all people.

The Good News of God’s love is made known in the birth, life, teachings, miracles, death, and resurrection of Jesus – so it’s something more than a sentimental love, and something more than affection. Undeserved forgiveness, unmerited grace, unconditional love: that’s the love made known in and through Jesus of Nazareth.

And such love has the power to change hearts, and change lives, and change this world. LOVE restores us to union with God and one another. In the whole biblical story – and for that matter, the entire human drama – LOVE is what restores us to union. LOVE moves us from alienation to reconciliation. As our Presiding Bishop says, “If it’s not about love, it’s not about God.” When we speak of the Gospel – when we speak of the “Good News” – we are speaking about God’s love for all people: love without conditions. There is nothing we can do to get God to love us less, and nothing we can do to get God to love us more: that kind of love.

Such Good News is always proclaimed in a context. On Christmas Eve the angel announced: “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” It’s all Good News on Christmas Eve: a time of Grace, Reconciliation, Wonder, and Presence. Heaven is joined to earth, and earth is joined to heaven.

And yet, the context of the proclamation is revealed in the story of the Epiphany as the wise men follow the star to the manger, bringing gifts and paying homage. And then, warned in a dream not to return to King Herod, they leave by another road.

This Season of Epiphany begins with this story. Joseph is warned by an angel to take the child and his mother to Egypt, and wait there until King Herod finally dies, for the insecure Herod intends to kill the newborn king.

As it happens, when the wise men fail to return to Herod, he figures out that he has been tricked. He flies into a furious rage, and decrees that all male children under the age of two will be killed. One way or the other, Herod determines that he will eliminate the threat of a rival king, so he orders the killing of all male newborns. And that is the harsh reality into which Jesus was born.

In the story, King Herod represents “the love of power.” Jesus is the outward, visible sign of “the power of love.”

The Good News of God’s love is announced in a particular context – a harsh reality. Babies around the world today are born into such a harsh reality. But I turn our attention this morning to a particular historical reality: the Holy Family of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are running for their lives from a political tyrant. In other words, they are refugees. By definition, they are refugees.

The welcome of refugees is an emotionally charged challenge today – to say the least. Many Americans – and I suspect most of us here this morning – have strong feelings about this. And certainly, there is a significant body of biblical passages and principles to support my personal position.

Before I go there, I would like to acknowledge that our leaders in political life have a tough job. And sometimes those in positions of authority or leadership (whether political, religious, or even business) don’t face an obviously easy choice between right and wrong. Sometimes the choice is between two good ideals, like the choice between safety and freedom. Or sometimes the choice is between the “lesser of two evils,” as we say. Sometimes there is no “good” choice. Ethical choices are made in the real world – not an ivory tower; ethical choices are made in a “fallen world” – not some imagined perfect world.

So speaking generally, perhaps we should grant some level of mercy to those entrusted to make such decisions. Having said that, I would like to draw our attention to the Chancellor of a united Germany for the last eleven years, TIME Magazine’s “Person of the Year” in 2015, and Angela Merkel.

As TIME reports, Merkel grew up in East Germany, and the first political memory of her life was the 1961 construction of the Berlin Wall. No other major Western leader grew up on that side of the wall, which gave her “a rare perspective on the lure of freedom and the risks people will take to taste it.”

In the year 2015 alone, Merkel led Germany to confront Vladimir Putin’s creeping theft of Ukraine; dealt with the prospect of Greece’s bankruptcy, which threatens the existence of the Euro; deployed troops abroad to fight ISIS; and welcomed refugees from ISIS controlled territories.

TIME Magazine’s rationale for choosing Merkel as “Person of the Year” is stated well in the following paragraph: “At a moment when much of the world is once more engaged in a furious debate about the balance between safety and freedom,

the Chancellor is asking a great deal of the German people, and by their example, the rest of us as well. To be welcoming. To be unafraid. To believe that great civilizations build bridges, not walls, and that wars are won both on and off the battlefield. By viewing the refugees as victims to be rescued rather than invaders to be repelled, [Merkel] the woman raised behind the Iron Curtain gambled on freedom. The pastor's daughter [her father was a Lutheran pastor] wielded mercy like a weapon. You can agree with her or not, but she is not taking the easy road. Leaders are tested only when people don't want to follow. For "Asking more of her country than most politicians would dare, for standing firm against tyranny as well as expedience, and for providing steadfast moral leadership in a world where it is in short supply, Angela Merkel is TIME's Person of the Year." [TIME, Dec 21, 2015, p50]

And yet, even someone as courageous, and compassionate, and visionary as Angela Merkel has to make tough choices. In July of 2015 Merkel met with some students for a televised discussion.

A young girl raised her hand and explained that her family members were Palestinian refugees who faced deportation to Lebanon. The 14 year old said (in fluent German), "As long as I don't know that I can stay here, I don't know what my future will be. I want to study. It's really painful to watch how other people can enjoy life and you can't enjoy it with them." According to TIME, "the Chancellor looked taken aback." She began to answer, and said, "I understand," before stopping herself. And then the Chancellor said: "Sometimes politics is hard. You're a nice person, but you know that there are thousands and thousands of people in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, and if we say, 'You can all come,' and 'You can all come from Africa,' and 'You can all come,' we just can't manage that." ... "Merkel broke off a moment later because the girl was weeping." "She muttered, 'I want to comfort her.' But the girl was inconsolable, and the footage went viral." [p66]

Sometimes there is no good choice. In our particular tradition – our heritage as Anglicans – we have a somewhat unique way of looking at ethical challenges. In a given situation, classic Anglican Moral Theology does not tend to ask, "What are we supposed to DO?" Rather, we tend to ask, "Who are we called to BE?" It's a question of "character." Who are we called to BE? As refugees are running for their lives, "Who are we called to be?" Even in the face of potential harm to ourselves, who are Christians called to be? It's not a question that necessarily leads to easy immediate answers. Arguably, it may not always be the right question for a political leader. But the question does point us to Christian practices

such as hospitality and welcoming the stranger, and to such Christian virtues as courage.

Momentarily, when we say together the Baptismal Covenant, we will be expressing both what we will do and who we will be, as we say we will persevere and resist evil; we will seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves; we will strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

And we will proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. We will proclaim and embody LOVE. We will believe in “the power of love.” The answer to the questions in the Baptismal Covenant – the answer to every question – is, “I will with God’s help.”

With God’s help we will proclaim and embody the Good News of God’s love which changes hearts, changes lives, and changes this world. With God’s help we will show forth and reveal the grace, mercy, forgiveness, justice, and love of God in the Name of the Holy Trinity, one God, in Whom we live, and move, and have our being. Amen.

