I should start by apologizing for that passage. I know we’ve all been celebrating Christmas in our homes, we’ve been enjoying the warmth of family and friends. And out of nowhere, this story comes along to throw a wet blanket on everything. This is not the Christmas story we’re used to.

Matthew and Luke, the two gospels that tell stories about Jesus’ birth, have very different versions of the circumstances around the first Christmas. We usually hear the Luke version with the journey to Bethlehem, the birth in a stable, shepherds in the fields and angels praising God. It’s uplifting, inspirational, joyful…why wouldn’t we highlight it and focus on it? And of course we also like to throw in the first part of this story from Matthew. The Magi are characters who are utterly non-threatening; they’re role models of responsive discipleship.

But the stories themselves are very different. For starters, in Luke Mary and Joseph live in Nazareth, travel to Bethlehem, and then go home to Nazareth. In Matthew the family lives in Bethlehem, are forced to leave, and then re-settle in Nazareth. In Luke shepherds are told of Jesus’ birth by angels; in Matthew, there are no shepherds and in fact, no one within Judea seems to know anything about the birth. Only the outsiders, the Magi, know. In Luke angels appear repeatedly in person to the characters; in Matthew angels only appear within dreams. Finally, in Luke’s story, after Jesus’ birth, the family goes to the temple for Jesus’ circumcision after 8 days and Jesus is excitedly and openly identified by a couple of people, Simeon and Anna. For Matthew, though, once the Magi leave, things take a very different turn.

We can’t really know what the writer of Matthew intends to convey with this story. Probably his main concern is placing Jesus’ story within the prophetic tradition of Judaism as a way of assuring his audience and maybe some opponents that Jesus’ life and ministry are legitimate. But a couple of weeks ago, when I preached at the 8:30 service but not this one because of the pageant, I shared a little piece of wisdom I had picked up recently. My daughter is reading the novel Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury for school. It was published in the ‘50s, but the introduction to the edition she’s reading is written by a contemporary writer named Neil Gaiman. As it happens he writes children’s books and comic books and is a terrific story teller. He says something in the introduction to the novel about reading stories that we should keep in mind whenever we read the Bible. Gaiman says if anyone tells you what a story means, assuming they’ve read it, they’re probably right and you should listen to them. But if they tell you that’s all the story means, then they are almost certainly wrong.

Stories always have layers of meaning and we can’t assume anyone’s interpretation is complete. The writer of Matthew is giving us an interpretation of this story about Jesus and his family and the events surrounding their flight into Egypt. He sees this as a fulfillment of prophecy and gives the impression that everything described is somehow intended as part of a great cosmic production. If you’re like me, though, you may have trouble getting past the
atrocity in Bethlehem being described and just chalking it up to fulfillment of prophecy, as if it “had to be.”

Now, I don’t think the writer of Matthew invented this story. For some reason this story made its way into the tradition around Jesus’ birth and the writer had to address it. His interpretation is an attempt to give it some kind of redemptive meaning. As it turns out, and this may help a little, there’s no evidence this ever actually occurred historically. Herod was known to be brutal, but there’s no record outside of this story of his ever ordering the deaths of children. Maybe knowing that helps a little. But the reality is, even though this particular incident never occurred, things like this have happened and do happen all the time.

Last week some of us heard about the project “Music in Exile” that Alex Ebsary and his friend Sasha have created. In their travels to refugee camps in Iraq they’ve heard some horrible stories from people very much like Mary, Joseph and Jesus; people who have had to flee their homes because they’d been targeted for violence. Right here in Buffalo we could learn all sorts of stories that make this one seem mild from the many refugees who live here. And none of those stories has anything to do with prophecy or natural consequences. They’re the result of human choices, decisions made by people in power to rain violence on other people who are vulnerable, easy targets.

Matthew’s story reveals a God who refuses to ignore that reality. But rather than meet it with a different form of violence, rather than appearing to the wealthy and powerful, God chooses to become vulnerable, to enter the experience of the weak and powerless. It’s worth noting, too, that in spite of all the differences between the stories in Luke and Matthew, one thing they have in common is a portrayal of God entering the world as someone displaced, someone entirely at the mercy of a brutal regime. God enters the world’s suffering. At the beginning of Matthew’s gospel Joseph in a dream by an angel that the child Mary is carrying will be called “Emmanuel,” which the writer translates, “God with us.” With us not in some abstract, spiritual way, but with us in the material reality of pain and hardship, fear and dread.

In the sermon my wife, Beth, is preaching at Westminster this morning she refers to the image of Rachel weeping for her children as an image of God weeping for the pain of the world. It’s a powerful way to convey how God is present and engaged with our experience and not indifferent.

But how does that engagement affect us? We aren’t refugees; we aren’t victims of oppression. How do we fit into this story? In his Christmas Eve homily Pope Francis referred to the child in the manger as a challenge to the world. He writes: “The Child who is born challenges us: he calls us to leave behind fleeting illusions and go to the essence, to renounce our insatiable claims, to abandon our endless dissatisfaction and sadness for something we will never have.” He then goes on to broaden the challenge: “Let us also allow ourselves to be challenged by the children of today’s world, who are not lying in a cot caressed with the affection of a mother and father, but rather suffer the squalid ‘mangers that devour dignity’: hiding underground to escape bombardment, on the pavements of a large city, at the bottom of a boat overladen with immigrants…who cry because no one satiates their hunger, by those who have not toys in their
hands, but rather weapons.” These “children of Bethlehem,” victims of atrocity no less deadly than Herod’s forces are all around us and are forced into hiding every day.

And we who have committed our lives to Christ, who are called to reveal Christ in the world, are called to enter the experience of these children, these women, these men, all who are victims of oppression and seek refuge. Emmanuel—God with us—is revealed in the world through us. Lately in social media I’ve come across a quote from the great theologian and mystic Howard Thurman who wrote in a poem titled “The Mood of Christmas:”

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.

How we do these things depends on our willingness to risk becoming vulnerable. If we advocate for immigrants and sponsor refugees, if we write letters to our congress people urging them to support legislation to address poverty, if we hang a rainbow banner on our building affirming all are welcome here, if we open our building as a refuge and sanctuary for undocumented immigrants under threat of deportation, if we stand with Muslim and Jewish neighbors who are targeted by hate crimes, we will open ourselves to criticism and even retaliation. But God does not hesitate to enter the world’s experience and become vulnerable and neither should we who live in God’s name.

There are many who are seeking refuge in our world, many who are forced into hiding to escape violence and threat; in Christ, God stands with them. May 2017 be the year we renew our commitment to stand with God and be counted among the refugees of our world. May we do the work of Christmas and proclaim, “Emmanuel!”

Amen