Before the Holy Family departed for Egypt, they were already tired with the newborn Jesus, like all newborns, restless and hungry and crying. The family didn’t have many resources or money. Their story resonates with us, over two thousand years later.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees defines a refugee as “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence.” The Holy Family and their donkey were refugees fleeing from Herod and his troops. As modern journalist Tyler Huckabee writes, “In [the Gospel of] Matthew [chapter 2], the angel tells Joseph to ‘Arise, and take the child and his mother, and flee into Egypt....’ In the original Greek, that word flee is phuge[:] it’s where we get our modern word, ‘refugee.’” We still see in our world today that families and communities move across cities, countries, and continents to find a better and safer life.

The angels tell the shepherds in the Christmas story that they come to bring a message of peace and goodwill for all peoples. As Unitarian Universalists, we are called and challenged again and again to offer care and concern for our neighbors in need, and come together as a spiritual community to work for greater peace, goodwill, and justice. In our First Parish covenant, we promise to each other every Sunday that we will encourage and comfort one another and live our beliefs through action and care for our world. And, we do this: we lead and engage in community efforts to support immigration reform, promote LGBTQ and racial equality, protect our precious planet, lessen the burdens of homelessness, and stop human trafficking; we give away half or all of our offering collection at every worship service to organizations that offer support to our neighbors and advocate for fairer laws; and, we encourage our children and teens to learn about justice issues and help support positive change.

At Christmastime, we gather with family and friends to share meals, sweets, drinks, and gifts as acts of generosity and love. We retell the story of the prophet Jesus and how he taught that it is the greatest commandment to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. And, we remember how we each and all have the power and compassion to ease the hurt of others and care for our Earth.
And so tonight on Christmas Eve, I remind us again of the questions Rev. Woodbury asked in our chalice lighting:

“What part will we play this year [in the Christmas story]? What parts do we see played around us, in our families, communities, and the world?

Are we the mother, resolved and trusting our bodies to know what to do when the time comes?

Are we the father, protecting our vulnerable family from unknown threats on a strange journey?

Are we the innkeepers who had no room, or will we take the stranger in?

… Who will sing the songs of rejoicing for the precious babe?

Who will rise up and follow the bright star of hope…?

What wise ones will give away their wealth to the needy and remember what to adore?”

In this congregation, we are so proud of every person for doing what small and big things we can to help our neighbors in need: trusting our bodies, protecting the vulnerable, taking in the stranger, rejoicing with our loved ones, keeping hope alive, and sharing the blessings of our own lives with others. We each have a special role to play.

May this holiday season continue to inspire and encourage us toward greater compassion and commitment to alleviate suffering in our families, communities, and the world. Blessed be, and amen.