

“THE HOLY FAMILY: A REFUGEE STORY”

Matthew 2:13-23

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Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins

Westminster Presbyterian Church

We have skipped ahead a little in the story. In Matthew’s gospel, this episode comes *after* the story of the wise men, which we’ll hear next week as we celebrate Epiphany, but is traditionally used as a reading for the first or second Sunday after Christmas, rather than for a Sunday after Epiphany. I’m not sure why that’s the case. Maybe the idea is to stay with the holy family and follow their journey as it continues. Maybe this reading is placed within the Christmas season to give the rest of the story some context, and to draw us away from the temptation to make the story of Jesus’ birth too sentimental.

Of course we focus on the story that Luke’s gospel tells us about the first Christmas. It’s a humble story but it’s also beautiful, and the invitation to return, every year, to simple faith, to wonder, to peace and hope and joy is something we sorely need. But we do also kind of set it apart in our minds, and picture it in a warm glow accompanied by angel songs... which makes it easy to forget how the difficult circumstances in which it took place.

The part of the story we read today certainly does not allow us to continue to bask in that warm glow, which probably explains why we mostly skip right over it. This is a difficult, tragic story that leaves us with unanswered questions – chief among them: why did God allow this horrible violence against innocent little children to happen? This part of the story leaves us to know that the birth of Jesus didn’t take place in a bubble; Jesus was born into a world where tyrants oppress their people, where children die and mothers weep inconsolably, where families sometime have to flee for their lives. There was danger and violence and sorrow and fear in the world Jesus was born into... and he was vulnerable to all of that.

For those who believe that in church we should just talk about the Bible, and not about anything political... I don’t know what to tell you. This is a political story. It’s about power, and about who has it and who does not. It’s about abuse of power, and what people will do to keep their power, and how other people go along and help that happen.

Perhaps most significantly it show us that what happens in the political arena can have life or death consequences for real people, often consequences that fall most heavily on the most vulnerable and on those who have had little or no say. That means of course, that there is a moral and spiritual dimension to matters that we often want to regard as simply different viewpoints or positions or parties. No doubt Herod had his defenders, on the grounds of security or economics or law and order... but those positions don’t carry much weight over against the weeping of the bereaved mothers. The scripture has a definite viewpoint here.

We aren’t told whether Joseph and Mary were aware of the violence of Herod and his soldiers, but Joseph clearly knew enough about Herod’s reputation to take the angel’s warning seriously. So they fled. In the night. It must have been a terrifying journey... wondering if they had

escaped in time, fearing they might be pursued, not knowing when they could consider themselves safe.

We don't know what it was like for them in Egypt, either. It wasn't home, certainly. They found a measure of safety; but did they find a welcome, or suspicious Egyptian neighbors? Did they have a hard time making a living, navigating a new language and culture, finding community? We want to believe that their time in Egypt was an interlude of peace for this little family, but we just don't know.

It cannot have been easy to be refugees, but that's what they were. (The Greek word in verse 13 translated as "flee" is related to our English word "refugee.") As refugees, Mary and Joseph, and Jesus as he grew, undoubtedly faced many of the same hardships and struggles as millions of other refugees have over subsequent centuries. This part of their story incorporates the grace and the pain that's typical of refugee stories: There's the sense of God's protection on the journey, the necessity that the child's life be saved so that Jesus' purpose in the world can be fulfilled, the relief of getting to safety. But there is also sadness because of the reasons that placed them in that position; there is danger and the sense of displacement from home and family. It's a complicated reality... and familiar to refugee families even today. It's no small thing, to realize that Jesus and his family lived that same experience. I can imagine that for some refugees who are Christian, it might give a little comfort to remember that Jesus can identify with their struggles.

For those of us who love Jesus and are secure in our homes and community, it pushes us to consider the refugee crisis of our present time in light of the story of the holy family's journey. Some will say, I'm sure, that this is a story about Jesus and not relevant to what's happening in our world today. I would say that is a hard case to make; there's very little in the Bible that's offered to us for mere historical or academic interest. The nature of scripture – its power, really – is that it continues to live and speak to the present reality of believers in every generation, as we wrestle with questions and needs that are new, and some that are not so new.

There's probably never been a time in history when there were not large numbers of people forced to leave home behind because of persecution, repression, armed conflict or other violence, or other events that have upended their lives, such as natural disasters. The present situation, though, is a crisis of enormous proportions, reflecting instability and disasters all around the globe.

At the beginning of 2021, the displaced people in our world numbered 82 million. If that's too big a number to grasp (it is for me), consider this: one out of every 95 people on the planet is a displaced person. Think about that for a moment: more than one percent of the people in the world are displaced from their homes! About 48 million of those people are internally displaced – that is, within their own countries – and over 30 million have had to leave their countries. And 42 per cent of them are children – as young as Jesus was, many of them.

From where we live we don't always see the extent of this crisis, let alone the faces of the people behind the statistics. Actually, from our usual vantage point, there are a lot of things we don't usually see.

I want to suggest that this part of the Christmas story we call "the flight into Egypt" asks us to see some of those things:

To begin with, it asks us to see Christmas – and especially the first Christmas – with a little less sentimentality –

...to see it in the context of the world in which it happened, the world to which Jesus came.

... to see it in the context of *our* world.

...to see even the things about our world we want to turn away from – the suffering of children and the anguish of parents, all the things that fill us with fear, the Herods of the world and those who cooperate with their demands.

It asks us to see the millions of children, parents, and others in our world who are refugees, and to see the very real and frightening reasons that have made them refugees.

It asks us to see Jesus, Mary, and Joseph among them, and in their faces.

It asks us to see with eyes of compassion, the eyes of Christ.

It asks us to see all this, and to consider where and with whom we stand.

It asks us to see and imagine better ways to respond, maybe based on how we would hope people in Egypt might have responded to the holy family.

This is not to say that there are not necessary and good ways (and less-good ways and maybe better ways) for countries to manage borders and security; it's only to say that some responses are not options for people of faith to support – for example: hate, suspicion of "outsiders", stereotypes, insularity, walls, rejection, prioritizing perceived self-interest, turning a blind eye to suffering, refusal of responsibility, acquiescence to the evils that drive people from their homes. The temptation to distance ourselves from those who seem distant and those who are desperate is real. But we see that Jesus didn't do that. If we choose to distance ourselves from people Jesus loves and walks among, we might end up distancing ourselves from him.

The gospel asks us to see *ourselves* differently – identifying with Jesus in his identification with the displaced, wandering, scared, hurting, and hopeful who seek a refuge – as don't we all? – in a frightening world.

As another new year begins, even as we continue to struggle with the anxieties and a sense of isolation and the necessary limitations of the pandemic, we can still choose not to live in a spirit of fear and isolation and limited vision. I hope we can commit to having more open hearts,

more generous and welcoming spirits, more willingness to see and learn about and understand the experiences of the displaced people of the world, whether or not they look or live or believe as we do. I hope that we can remember the rest of the Christmas story, and where and among whom Jesus is found in this story. I hope that we perceive, beyond the distressing aspects of this story, how it is also a story of the grace of God come into our world, into the midst of our greatest fears and most intractable troubles, to accompany us on our journeys and lead us into love.

Amen.

Resources:

United Nations High Commission for Refugees (<https://www.unhcr.org/>)