

The Refugees

Matthew 2:13-23

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A voice I heard swooping round, skipping across the magnolia trees, swirling restlessly through the air, skimming across her little roof—why, it was Mother Bluebird weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they were no longer in the house I built for them. No, not there in the nest she built for them in that house, where but moments ago they were; until I took them not knowing they were not dead, no, not dead, but only sleeping; sleeping in a sleep so deep I believed they were dead and abandoned. Blue downy feathers still lay over their flattened, lifeless-looking forms like funeral shrouds yet more like baby blankets. I had placed the fledglings gently in a thicket of saplings and shrubbery so that they might rest in peace.

I still hear the bewildered wailing of their mother, Mother Bluebird, when I read of Rachel weeping for her children, or of the slaughter of innocent children anywhere. I wrote about such an episode. In Drenica, a valley in Kosovo, 34 civilians were slaughtered in one day in 1998. Nearby survivors had to bury the dead; surviving family members who weren't nearby dared not approach for the danger remained. Thousands upon thousands fled their homes and their homelands, carrying only a few belongings and a load of grief to escape ethnic cleansing.

If only such sorrows were so infrequent as to be unimaginable! If only, but even within the Bible we see such instances. There's the marvelous rescue of the baby Moses. Early in the book of Exodus we read, "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." That new king feared the immigrant population that had come with the family of Joseph and his brothers. He was afraid their growing numbers would overpower the Egyptians. So he told the Egyptian midwives to kill all the baby boys. "Every boy that is born you shall throw onto the Nile," he said. The happy part of the story is that the king's own daughter found the baby Moses floating in a basket in the river and adopted him. The story, however, is not so happy for the mothers of all the other Hebrew baby boys.

Again, in our gospel reading for today from Matthew, it is a fearful king who orders the slaughter of innocent babies. He hears of the birth of a new king of the Jews and fears loss of his power. Therefore he orders a search for the baby,

supposedly to honor him, but actually to eliminate him. When the wise men wisely steer clear of the king on their way back to the East, the story tells us, “he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under.” Voices of mothers were heard in and around Bethlehem. Wailing. Loud lamentation. Mothers refusing to be consoled. But not the voice of Mary.

No, for an angel had spoken to Joseph in a dream, saying, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt.” So, like the other Joseph, who long ago had been taken to Egypt not by choice but because of his jealous brothers, yet all for the good as God worked things out, this Joseph goes to Egypt with Mary and the baby Jesus.

How fortunate for the Holy Family to find refuge in Egypt! The phrase, “take refuge,” is found throughout the Bible, from Numbers to the Psalms to the book of Hebrews in the New Testament. That’s what the angel told Joseph to do. Take refuge. Become a refugee.

Last year, I invited our friend Rida Rishmawi, who is from the Shepherd’s Hill village outside Bethlehem, though he now lives in Fort Worth, Texas, to First Christian Church in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, to sell olive wood carvings made in Bethlehem. Paula purchased a handsome piece depicting Joseph with Mary and Jesus on a donkey making their way as refugees toward Egypt. It’s part of our year-round living room décor and reminds us continually of those around the world who are seeking refuge.

The United Nations High Commission on Refugees has stated this definition:

A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.

Joseph and Mary with their baby had a well-founded fear of persecution and were forced to flee their country because of violence. They were refugees.

Someone argued, “But they weren’t *illegal* refugees!” Ha! Of course not—for there weren’t laws about such things in those days, and even boundaries were vague. Egypt was beyond the jurisdiction of King Herod, though. And Egypt was where people of Israel had fled for refuge from time to time.

Who knows what stories Jesus heard as a child about this chapter of his early life? Most of us don't have conscious memories of our first two years of life, but many of us have heard stories from those days. For example, I know my family lived in another house at that time of my life, and I know they had a big garden watered by an irrigation ditch. Perhaps Jesus understood that he had been a refugee.

In fact, it was a part of religious tradition that Israel came from refugees. In chapter 26 of Deuteronomy, the creed by which people professed their identity with the covenant between God and Israel begins: *A wandering Aramean was my ancestor: he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien.* Welcoming refugees was an act of grateful memory of when they themselves had been given refuge. Jesus could connect his personal story with the story of his people.

So, in chapter 25 of this gospel, "when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him," and the nations are gathered before him, and to those at his left hand he says, "I was a stranger and you did not welcome me," it make no difference if there were laws in Egypt or Rome or anywhere else that told those nations not to welcome the refugee. He does not say, "I know you might have given me food or drink or a safe welcome if it hadn't been against the law."

Here in Greensboro, the FaithAction International House turns strangers into neighbors. This program trains individuals and churches in understanding people who have immigrated as refugees. It provides many services, including finding temporary emergency housing. Also, Church World Service and similar agencies in our community have welcomed immigrants and refugees from many parts of the world.

At the same time, for the past 559 days, mothers have been separated from their children, and children from their mothers, in detention camps—not in this county, but in this country. As these days pass, as this time approaches 600 days, will a day come when we no longer hear their bewildered wailing? And after that—or even now—what will the long-term spiritual, emotional, psychological effects be?

How I longed to pick up those fledgling bluebirds and place them safely back in the bluebird house I'd built! How I long to pick up the babies isolated in detention camps and place them safely back in the arms of their mothers and fathers! And place those mothers and fathers safely where they need not fear persecution!