

The Refugees

Matthew 2:13-23

January 10, 2021

1st Sunday after Epiphany

“Flee to Egypt.” With those words echoing in Joseph’s ears, he got up, took the baby Jesus and Mary by night and went to Egypt. Regardless of whether this story really happened exactly the way Matthew tells it or not, it’s not hard to imagine it’s true. The names and faces might change, but it’s a story that is lived in lands throughout the world -- not only then, but today.

We’ve seen the pictures. We’ve read the news. We’ve talked to people. We’ve felt the outrage. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were not the first refugees and they will not be the last. What do you hear in today’s gospel in the flight to Egypt? What feelings does it evoke? What images fill your mind’s eye? What prayers arise within you? What experiences does it recall from your life? What does it have to do with you and me?

I picture a little boy and his mom and dad. Violence, a tyrant ruler, an oppressive government, and the threat of death have them on the run. They have left behind more than what they have taken. I feel the parents’ fear and the knot in their stomachs. Their only priority is to protect the child and keep him safe.

I see them feeling their way through the darkness of night hoping not to be noticed. With each passing moment they are a bit further from the known and familiar, and closer to the unknown and unfamiliar. I hear their whispered questions. When will we get there? How much further is it? What will we find? What will it be like?

I am not talking about only Jesus and the Holy Family, I’m also talking about Alan and the Kurdi family. Remember them? The story and picture made international headlines nearly six years ago, and broke the hearts of millions.

One child arrived safely in Egypt. The other child drowned and washed up on a Turkish beach. Both were refugees and they shared a common story as they fled for safety. I cannot explain why one child found refuge and the other didn’t.

There are no good or acceptable reasons for that, but I can tell you what are *not* the reasons. It is not because Jesus’ life mattered more, was more important, or more valuable than Alan’s. It’s not because God loves Jesus more than Alan. It’s not because Jesus is God’s eternal son and Alan was just another Syrian refugee.

If we think it's any one of those things, we have missed the point of Christmas. We have denied that the Word became flesh; human flesh, flesh like Alan's, like yours, like mine. In Jesus, God shares our humanity so that we might share his divinity.

The depth and measure of God's joy and thanksgiving that Jesus arrived safely in Egypt is equaled only by the depth and measure of God's anger and sorrow that Alan did not reach his Egypt.

God's heart is with the refugee. It has been since the time of Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. In the birth of Jesus, in the angel of the Lord who spoke to Joseph in a dream, and in the Holy Family's flight to Egypt, God has been aligned with the refugees of this world, not only with Alan but with you and me as well.

Those two little boys, Jesus and Alan, are the faces of a refugee humanity, a humanity you and I share with them. In Alan's face we see a modern day retelling of the flight to Egypt, and in Jesus' face we see the spark that ignites hope, kindles the fire of love, and illumines the darkness for all refugees.

Their stories confront us with our own refugee status and bring to mind the times we have fled to Egypt. If your life has ever been disrupted and you needed a safe place to get away to; if you've ever known it was no longer safe or good for you to stay where you were or to stay the way you were; if you've ever left the known and familiar and traveled in darkness to the unknown and unfamiliar; if you've ever realized your life was at risk and you had to make a change; if your survival depended on crossing borders into a new and foreign land; if you've ever experienced these or a thousand other things like them, then you know what it's like to be a refugee.

My guess is that we all know what that's like. We may not have had the same experience as Jesus and the Holy Family or Alan and the Kurdi family, but we share a common story and a common status.

Herod is not just a king in Israel some two thousand years ago. In every age Herod is the power, circumstances, and abuses that disrupt and seek to destroy life. Herod is that one who creates refugees. For every refugee there is a Herod, and there are all sorts of refugees and all kinds of Herods.

You see, being a refugee is not only about tyrant kings, oppressive governments, and threats of death. It's also about a deep longing and drive for a new life and a new place in life. It's hearing and responding to the nighttime calling of God. The refugee life is neither

easy nor safe but we never go alone. We go with the God of refugees, the God whose son according to scripture “had nowhere to lay his head.” Mt 8:20

Some people are refugees from a marriage or relationship that is unhealthy, destructive, or violent. Some are refugees from the land of addiction. Some are refugees wandering through the darkness of depression, emptiness, or a life seemingly void of meaning. Some are fleeing the countries of neglect or abuse. Many have recognized behaviors and choices that they had to flee or situations they just had to get away from.

Most of us have probably been refugees from the land of grief and sorrow. Maybe you’re there right now. I don’t know what your refugee story is, but I’ll bet you have one. I’ll bet you have had at least one time in your life when you had to get to Egypt. Your life depended on it. You left home for a better place, a different life, a new way; and you left not really knowing where you were going or what you would find when you got there. You trusted the child to show you the way. You followed in the footsteps of the Holy Family and with each step along the way your life was the retelling of today’s gospel.

Every time I hear today’s gospel, every time I read about refugees in today’s news, I cannot help but wonder – What if Egypt had closed the borders of its heart? What if the Holy Family had arrived only to find a big wall and locked doors? What if the Egyptian people had said, “There’s no room for you here?” What story would we be telling today? Would there be any good news for Christians? Would there be any good news for the refugees of the world? For you? For me?

Maybe the divine spark would have been extinguished. But that didn’t happen. Perhaps Egypt remembered. Perhaps Egypt remembered another time, another Joseph in the Old Testament, another refugee people. Perhaps God sent the Holy Family to a land that would remember. Perhaps God was hoping and counting on Egypt to remember it had once been a place of refuge for God’s people, and it could be again.

Oh, that we too might remember; that we might remember the Holy Family, Alan and the Kurdi family, for every family is holy. That we might remember the refugees in the news, and our own flights to Egypt. Oh, that we might remember – the refugees – all of them.
Amen

Matthew 2:13-23

The Escape to Egypt

¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ “A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰ “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” ²¹ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³ There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”