

What We Are Waiting For: Home

TEXT:
Isaiah 63:7-9
Matthew 2:13-26

December 30, 2007

Matthew concludes his account of the birth of Jesus with a disturbing story of murder and the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt and into safety, beyond the reach of King Herod. Even in the midst of the beauty and wonder of the birth of the Christ Child, the Bible does not shy away from showing how the innocent suffer because of greed and abuse of power.ⁱ

This story speaks to us on several levels. First, the encounter with Herod and the flight into Egypt provides us with the first evidence of human opposition to Jesus. We are immediately struck by the sudden, decisive, murderous choice made by Herod. What he ordered is unimaginable. Yet, the action describe in this story is well within the character of Herod, a cruel and barbarous ruler. As John Calvin said of this passage, "Christ, having just been born, begins to be crucified for us."ⁱⁱ

So Joseph, Mary and the child go into exile. Exile is a common experience for the people of God. Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Paradise. Abraham, the patriarch of the Hebrew people, left his family and his home in Ur, near the Iraq/Kuwait border. Jacob and his sons were driven into Egypt as economic refugees. The early Israelites remained in

Egypt for several generations, eventually becoming slaves in the Egyptian economy. In one of the great moments in biblical history, they were lead back to the Promised Land, but only after a 40-year period of exile in the wilderness desert between Egypt and Israel. Hundreds of years later, the Jews were again forced from their homes, becoming political refugees, first in Babylon and later Syria.

So here, in this story, Matthew connects Jesus with this history of the Jews longing for home.

There are several fun and imaginative stories of Jesus' sojourn into Egypt. One has the Holy Family traveling to Matariyah, just North of Cairo. Legend has it that Jesus was responsible for the growth of the palm trees in the region, the balm of which was used as a healing agent for many ailments from snake-bites to runny noses. This tradition is found in several 5th Century Egyptian Christian manuscripts, and is mentioned in the Koran, the Holy book of Islam. In another story, when Jesus and his family arrive in the city of Hermopolis Magna, all the idols of the city fell to the ground.ⁱⁱⁱ

Throughout his gospel, Matthew seems to connect Jesus with important stories in the Jewish tradition. He wants his Jewish audience to recognize that this Jesus was the One promised in the Hebrew Scripture as the

Messiah. Here, Matthew places Jesus with the Exodus tradition, the central experience shaped and formed the Jewish people.

What the Jews learned during the Exodus, and what they continued to affirm in their scriptures and liturgy, was that God had heard their cry when they were slaves in Egypt and God acted on their behalf for their liberation. Matthew is proclaiming that God is still doing that; God still acts on behalf of the liberation of the people. In the face of the horrendous plans of Herod, God intervenes and guides Joseph and the family away from the trouble. God protects the future of this child. God is at work, Matthew declares, even when the powers of this world are aligned against God.

Here is a second lesson we can draw from this text. Throughout the scripture, God is seen working on behalf of those who are in exile. In this story, the refugee is Jesus, living life as strangers in a strange land, refugees far from home. Jesus was displaced from his home for political reasons, by the edict of a despotic madman whose actions had horrendous consequences. Jesus was a refugee.

In the Bible, the Jews were frequently reminded that God had acted as their protector and guide when they were displaced people. Do you remember how

the passage on the Ten Commandments begins? “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” [Exodus 20:2; Leviticus 26:13] Jews were never to forget nor neglect that fact. Their faith, their tradition, was built on the fact that God had acted for them. But they were also reminded that because God acted on their behalf, they, too, were to act with charity toward those who were strangers: “You shall not oppress a stranger,” God spoke in Exodus, “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” [Exodus 23:9, see also, Deuteronomy 10:19]

The third lesson we draw from this story helps us understand the plight of refugees in the world today. Today the problem of refugees in the world may be bigger than ever. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, the year 2006 saw a great increase in the number of refugees or internally displaced persons the world over. By the close of 2006, nearly 30 million people fell into those categories, an increase of 56 per cent from the year before.^{iv}

Shortly after 9/11, Carolyn and I attended a conference of the World Council of Churches in Geneva. Beth Ferris, the director of the refugee work for the council, offered several reasons for this increase in the number of refugees throughout the world.

First, there many more people in the world moving from one place to another within their own country to avoid ethnic conflict or war. These people are called internally displaced people. One of the reasons that the violence in Iraq has abated is that so

many people have fled their homes to escape the sectarian violence of their neighborhood, that there are very few left to slaughter. This same pattern is seen in Columbia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Sudan. The number of refugees has overwhelmed refugee support efforts around the world.

Second, governmental attention given to the refugee problem has declined significantly in the last decade. Many national governments had been elected on a platform of keeping immigrants out of the country. Earlier in this decade, Australia offered \$20 million to any other country that would take a boatload of refugees off its hands. It was reminiscent of the voyage of the Saint Louis, a ship loaded with Jews fleeing Germany in 1939, which was denied landing rights here in America.

Third, the problem becomes more complex because of the advancement of the global economy. The economic and social conditions that once provided people with the means to survive in their traditional communities have broken down, leading to a great movement of people across borders. The problem is enlarged by the great inequality of wealth between the industrialized nations of the North and the underdeveloped countries of the South.

The story of the flight of Jesus into Egypt provides us with some guidelines for a Biblical reflection on the status of refugees in the world today.

This story affirms that God became known to us in the person of Jesus Christ who was himself a refugee. This

encourages us to watch for and care about the stranger in our midst. We are reminded to uphold the life and dignity of all uprooted people. A report issued by The World Council of Churches says,

“People leave their communities for many reasons, and are called by different names – refugees, internally displaced, asylum-seekers, migrants. As Churches, we lift up all those who are compelled by severe political, economic and cultural conditions to leave their land and culture.”^v

We lift up those who are displaced by defending legal and human rights and promoting international standards for refugee populations.

We also see in this story God’s love for those who are strangers, who live as outsiders and on the edge of society. The Bible constantly speaks of the values of love, justice, and equity on behalf of the marginalized and excluded people everywhere. The church is called to work for economic and political justice for those persons who are without voice or power in the face of global, economic and military changes.

There is also this curious fact in the story: Jesus went to land of the Gentiles. We see again that God’s reign does not stop at the border of the land or the tradition of the Hebrew people. The biblical witness always calls the church to build inclusive communities. Churches need to support the initiatives of uprooted people as they seek to establish themselves in new communities. We need to engage in steps to live out our faith positively in diverse communities. A community cannot be inclusive if only the

“other,” the stranger, must adapt and conform to existing norms and identity.

In our seminar at the World Council of Churches, Beth Ferris told us many heartbreaking stories of displaced people around the globe. But let me tell you one of her stories that goes to the heart of our faith. She met a woman who had been a professor at a college in Angola who had been uprooted during the war there and exiled into Mozambique. After several years there doing day labor, she was brought to Geneva for a conference Beth had put together for professional women refugees. During the meetings, Beth noted that the woman was very subdued and withdrawn from the activities of the conference. After several conversations, Beth was able to gleam from the woman that when she was taken by force out of Angola, her glasses had been smashed, and for five years she had been existing without them. In her current work, she could not afford to buy another pair. Through these years she had been virtually blind.

That evening Beth told the woman’s story to her family. She complained that her budget at the office was overspent and she couldn’t help one woman without feeling the concern for all the others.

Her teenaged daughter who never had much patience with bureaucracy, said, “Mom, I have my own credit card now. I’ll take her to one of the places that make glasses in an hour and pay for it myself.”

Beth said she will never forget the tears that flowed down the face of her tough, rebellious

daughter when the woman from Angola placed the glasses on her nose and proclaimed boldly, “I can see. I can see.”

The prophet Isaiah records,
It was no messenger or angel but the presence of the Lord that saved them; in God’s love and pity, God redeemed them; God lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. (Isaiah 63:9)

Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Kathleen Long Bostrom, *For Everything, A Season: A Study of the Liturgical Calendar* (Horizons, 2005), 31

ⁱⁱ John Calvin. *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, John Calvin, 1558

ⁱⁱⁱ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, (Doubleday, 1977), 203

^{iv} Report of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, accessed at <http://www.unhcr.org/statistics/STATISTICS/4676a71d4.pdf>

^v “RESOLUTION ON UPROOTED PEOPLE,” World Council of Church, Central Committee, February 2001. Accessed at <http://www.wcc-coe.org>

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