

Jesus Was a Refugee

We began our worship and our first scripture lesson with the magi, the wise men, bowing down in worship of a young baby. The baby was God incarnate. They were worshipping God, who had come to earth and put on flesh and dwelled among God's people.

These wise men offered their very best to baby Jesus. Their best was a quest to find God. Their best was having faith in a sign – a star – that they knew could only be from the Creator of the world. Their best was to offer gifts fit only for a king – gold, frankincense and myrrh.

While fulfilling their quest, they had stopped and met with King Herod and asked him, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.

Herod played along for a while...inviting them to tell him about the star and their journey. He got his advisers and experts to help figure out what prophecies the magi were referring to. Herod even asked them to go find the child, and then come back to tell him where this baby was so that he too may go and worship him. But that was all just an act. Herod feared anything that would topple his political system, anyone who could threaten his power or the status quo. Herod was out for blood. Specifically the blood of Jesus.

And then we moved to our second scripture lesson with Joseph, Mary and Jesus fleeing.

It's a familiar scene for too many. A crisis causes people – families – to be on the move. Stories of dangerous travels across deserts and borders. Bags hurriedly packed in the middle of the night because one must rush out of town. Danger behind and danger ahead...yet the former is so powerful that there is literally no other option.

This is true because your home country – that should be protecting you – is now targeting you. Or at the very least, targeting the ones you love. You leave everything and everyone you know, not out of some fantasy to hit it rich or foolish

desire for a new adventure...you leave out of sheer fear of danger....seeking survival.

You wonder if you will ever return home. Anxiety creeps up as you question what your reception will be like in a foreign land. You hope that you are making the best decision for your family. The specific threats of death on your life, and the lives of your children, are stronger than the potential death that could take place during your escape, right?

You have heard this family's story time and time again. No, it isn't the Syrian families barred from coming to America. It isn't the Libyan family bobbling in the Mediterranean. It isn't the Latino family making their way across the deserts of Mexico and it isn't the ones used as political pawns put on a bus and delivered to the Vice President's home on Christmas Eve.

This is the story of Joseph, Mary and Jesus fleeing Nazareth because of a very viable death threat on Jesus' life. He and all Jewish males under the age of two were to be killed.

One day kings were bowing down to worship this little child, showering him with royal gifts. The next day, a different king sent troops to kill that child, with a viciousness that is comparable to modern day ISIS and the drug cartels of South America.

Scripture makes a clear point: Jesus and his family were refugees. Jesus was a refugee.

In the United States, we define refugee status with specific legal protections that are available to people who have left their home country for their own safety and are afraid to return. To be granted such status, US Citizenship and Immigration Services requires that you are:

1. Unable or unwilling to return to your home country because you have been persecuted there in the past or have a well-founded fear that you will be persecuted if you go back. Check Joseph's dream, according to Matthew 2:16, "When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and in its vicinity who were two years old and under." That is a well-founded fear for Mary and Joseph to feel unsafe to return.

2. The reason you have been, or will be, persecuted is connected to one of five things: your race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or your political opinion. CHECK! Jesus' status as the newly born messiah, the rightful heir of King David, the future savior of the world, has racial and religious overtones and his life is about to start a whole new political and social revolution based in the love and power of God.

Even today, Jesus would have been considered a refugee. This leaves us with two questions:

1. Why is it important that Jesus was a refugee?
2. How does that impact our response to the current crisis that is taking place in our world today?

So let's tackle that first question. Why is it important that Jesus was a refugee?

Hebrews 4:14-16 in the Message translation says this: Now that we know what we have – Jesus, this great High Priest with ready access to God – let's not let it slip through our fingers. We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all. So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help.

For people in crisis – a crisis of location, of identity, of sorrow, of abandonment, of pain or confusion – Jesus has experienced it. It is important that we recognize that in every human situation. God incarnate is not out of touch. God isn't that God who is above the human condition.

God doesn't sit in heaven and be all, "I don't get it. I am too holy for that kind of pain." Go back to the scripture. Jesus has been through weakness and testing...so let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. And then the instruction...take the mercy, accept the help.

The refugees I have known have expressed a deep gratefulness that Jesus' story overlaps with theirs. It makes them feel not as isolated. It is like how unwed mothers see themselves in Jesus' birth narrative through the eyes of Mary. Or people who resonate with Peter in needing Jesus to reassure them of his love after denying Christ.

There is something comforting when you find yourself in the narrative of Jesus life.

So it was important for the millions of displaced people, the immigrants and refugees to find comfort in Jesus' story. Knowing his family had been through this. God's gotcha!

Second question: How does Jesus being a refugee impact our response to the current crisis that is taking place in our world today?

I will confess that I am not un-biased when it comes to the issue of refugees.

I tried to figure out recently where my passion for this issue comes from. I believe it started when I was working at Storer Camps. I had a co-worker there named Grace who was from Lebanon. If you remember during the 70s there was a war going on in Lebanon. Grace and I became very close and she came to my house on several occasions during that summer and became close with my family as well.

The end of the summer came, and Grace would have to head home to Lebanon and she was terrified. It was then that my parents began the discussion about housing Grace after her visa ran out. It was a dangerous idea, one I was very nervous about. In the end, Grace decided she couldn't leave her family in Lebanon and returned home. We never heard from her again.

So while I was the pastor here at Central, the Syrian crisis began and I was hearing that our government was not willing to take people fleeing for their lives. It was then that this congregation said we would house refugees in our apartment here at the church. But before we ever got a Syrian refugee family here, we got a call to take in a family from Angola that were fleeing for their lives. The wife and mother of the family had been thrown out a window and had broken legs. They had four children under the age of 10. We gave them safe harbor until a doctor befriended them and got them housing and they were granted asylum.

Then, Ded and Flora Rranxburgaj and their two sons moved in from Albania. Ded was under the threat of deportation. We fought hard for that family and after three and a half years they were granted a stay of deportation. However, they will never be granted full citizenship in the United States.

Two years ago, we welcomed Pierre and Noella and their daughter They from Cameroon. Pierre had been beaten by his government for speaking out against it. He had horrible scars from being hit with steel sticks. They were granted asylum and are now living in Grosse Pointe Woods and they are expecting another baby.

And now we have welcomed Daouda and Zahatia from the Ivory Coast, fleeing for their lives and the life of their unborn baby that is due next month.

I really never understood the plight of the refugee until we became a sanctuary church. I have learned more about the broken immigration system than I ever knew before. These “refugees” have become my family.

Dr. Christine Hong in her commentary on Matthew 2:1-23 says this: “When my parents became immigrants in the United States, their experience of being welcomed by the Korean American community was what grounded them during a bewildering and tumultuous time. In the Korean American church, they sustained life together, preserving culture and language for their children, and processing the many ways racism affected their lives. For them, in the Korean American church there were no strangers, only extended family.

When we consider Mary, Joseph and Jesus’ story as refugees, fleeing from an enraged despot, I wonder about the people who came alongside them. We know the example of the Magi, who protected the Holy Family by going home another way. Yet, surely, there were others, too. People who helped the new parents and their child hide along the way to Egypt. Neighbors who helped settle the small family in a new country, among a new people. Friends who helped them learn a new language and new ways of life. Jesus probably had many aunts and uncles who were not his blood relations but were family all the same. I give thanks for all my great aunts and great uncles via war and displacement, for all the Korean American church aunts and uncles who raised me, and for the aunts and uncles in Jesus’ life those thousands of years ago. I give thanks for the strangers who became friends and family through solidarity with the Holy Family, wanting a better world, not only for themselves but for a refugee family too.

Let’s look at our art on the front of your bulletin entitled “Flight to Egypt” by Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman. She says this about her art. Joseph must uproot his family from their home to ensure their son will become who he was made to be. In this

image, the Holy Family escapes the wrath of Herod in Bethlehem and faithfully travels toward the looming unknown in Egypt. They are flanked by flowers: on the left are Star of Bethlehem flowers and on the right are stylized lotus flowers you might see in Egyptian art. In the background are shadowy figures. On the left, they represent Herod's men seeking to kill Jesus, and on the right, they represent the weight of the past – God's enslaved people and their oppressors.

The menacing silhouettes surround the family, personifying the inherent risk in either path they choose to take. The angel of God envelops the Holy Family in an embrace, comforting them from the grief of leaving home and shielding them from the fear of what is to come. In other icons of this pilgrimage, the Nile River often flows below teeming with fish, but I chose to fill the water with lotus flowers, Egypt's national flower and a symbol of regeneration. God is writing a new story, transforming their destination, which swells with generational trauma and pain, into a haven of refuge and rebirth.

I am pretty passionate about this topic. It's no wonder that my blood starts to boil when I read stupid articles or hear news clips of ignorant politicians saying racist crap. I hope that makes your blood boil too.

Because as Christians, we are not supposed to live in fear of people who look different than us. We are not supposed to ignore them or just give up because there are so many.. So what can we do?

This is a current reality that we need to be thinking about, contributing to the conversation, praying for and even tangibly doing something to care for refugees. That's the model that Jesus gave us.

Learn about the broken immigration system so you are ready to respond when someone says, "Why don't they just come into our country legally." Learn that it takes thousands and thousands of dollars to do that. And also remember and share that entering our country and claiming asylum IS the legal way to enter our country.

When we stick up for the vulnerable in society, we stick up for Jesus. When we offer hospitality to those in need...we are being hospitable to Christ himself.

When we advocate for systemic mercy and justice, we are fulfilling our Christian mandate to love our neighbor.

I don't know what the next days, weeks, months or years are going to hold for us. What resources we will have to share? Which people are going to come and worship with us? What mission will God lay on our hearts?

But I will tell you this for sure, the current landscape of our world is there is a refugee crisis and we are not going to sit by and ignore it. We will recognize that the one we worship was once a refugee and it is by his command that we receive current refugees as we would receive Jesus himself.

Let me close with a poem written by Warsan Shire, a British-Somali poet.

No one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark.
You only run for the border
when you see the whole city
running as well.
Your neighbors running faster
than you, the boy you went to school with
who kissed you dizzy behind
the old tin factory is
holding a gun bigger than his body,
you only leave home
when home won't let you stay,
no one would leave home unless home
chased you, fire under feet,
hot blood in your belly.
It's not something you ever thought about
doing, and so when you did –
you carried the anthem under your breath,
waiting until the airport toilet
to tear up your passport and swallow,
each mouthful of paper, making it clear that
you would not be going back.

you have to understand,
no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land.
Who would choose to spend days and nights
in the stomach of a truck
unless the miles travelled
meant something more than the journey.

Jesus was a refugee and we are called to care for the refugees in our midst. Amen.