

## MATTHEW'S GRUESOME GOSPEL

**TEXT:** Matthew 2:13-23

For many of us, 2018 has been a year that has been left behind with good riddance. Bring on 2019! The gruesome story of the slaughter of the innocents, unique to Matthew, seems an all too perfect lesson to summarize this past year – and the year before – and the year before that. There was more slaughter of the innocents than we could perhaps bear – Pittsburgh, Annapolis, Nashville, Parkland, and many more. And when the innocents are slaughtered, so is our innocence.

When Mary and Joseph end up in Egypt, they had to question where the innocence went. The wonder of a miraculous birth gives way to the brutal realities into which their baby is born. That is usually how innocence is lost – when the joy of life is overshadowed by that which, or who, seeks to take life. When the hope in life is usurped by events and circumstances that pull the rug out from under us.

And the rug was indeed pulled out from under the little family. After the Wise Men spilled the information about where the “new king” had been born, Herod had a major hissy fit. He was not going to sit back and allow another king in his realm. After all, this is the man who was infamous for his brutality. This is a man who had murdered his own sons, one of his wives, and countless opposition. He was so suspicious and insecure that he called a secret meeting of religious leaders and extracted information about the exact time and place of the birth of the new king, Jesus, knowledge that would later prove fatal for many.

When Herod learned that the magi (or wise men – or kings) had tricked him and did not return to tell him the information that he needed in order to rid the realm of any opposition, he felt he had only one choice. To be perfectly safe in his complete control, in his furious rage he ordered the murder of all male children two years old and younger who lived in Bethlehem and vicinity.

Meanwhile, Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus fled to pagan Egypt to find protection. The political ironies in the flight to Egypt are remarkable. The infant Son of God fled as a displaced refugee to a foreign land. Egypt, Israel's sworn and symbolic enemy that had oppressed the Hebrews for 430 years. The place where Pharaoh had unleashed his own infanticide against the firstborn Israelite children became a refuge for the baby Jesus.

In the end, and as with the Egyptian Pharaoh, it was king Herod "the Great" who died about 4 BC. And just as the baby Moses survived Pharaoh's mass murder, so too did the baby Jesus survive Herod's infanticide.

This story is very familiar to Christians and we love to "boo" Herod and cheer on the Holy Family. But what about their "flight into Egypt"? I don't think they booked seats on Egypt Air. The writer does not tell us anything more than that the family rushed to Egypt and eventually returned to make their home in Nazareth. We are not told how and when they returned, only that again an angel kept Joseph informed when the crisis in Jerusalem had passed and he could return.

I'd never really considered how all of this worked out for the family until I was in Egypt just a year ago. We traveled to a town named Matariya in the suburbs of Cairo. We were taken through some busy streets to a small building with some stairs that took us down to an area where it was understood to be a stopping place on the family's flight. It is probably the most important site in the world for anyone wishing to contemplate Joseph, Mary and Jesus as refugees.

For new refugees, here as anywhere else, life would have been very hard. The first-century Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, tells us of the consequences of poverty, which could result in enslavement. Presumably, Jewish charity and voluntary giving through the synagogue would have helped a struggling refugee family, but they would also have been reliant on the kindness of strangers.

The legacy of being a refugee and a newcomer to a place far from home is something that I think informed Jesus' teaching. When he set off on his mission, he took up the life of a displaced person with "nowhere to lay his head". He asked those who acted for him to go out without a bag or a change of clothing, essentially to walk along the road like destitute refugees who had suddenly fled, relying on the generosity and hospitality of ordinary people whose villages they entered. It was the villagers' welcome or not to such poor wanderers that showed what side they were on. Mark quotes Jesus telling them: "and if any place will not receive you and refuse to hear you, shake off the dust on your feet when you leave for a testimony to them".

Refugees seem to come in different forms and different times, and for different reasons. According to the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees, they are defined in the following way:

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. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. That certainly applies to Jesus, along with Mary and Joseph, and it applies to the thousands who are straining at the borders of our country and other countries as well. It is the largest political issue today.

Can you imagine being forced to flee your country in order to escape to safety? If you were lucky you had time to pack a bag. If not, you simply dropped everything and ran. Refugees are people fleeing conflict or persecution. They are defined and protected by international law, and that law says that they must not be expelled or returned to situations where their life and freedom are at risk. Life as a refugee can be difficult to imagine. But, for 25.4 million people around the world, it is a terrifying reality.

The Biblical King Herod represents the impunity of the powerful. Empire, or the ways of the world, destroy our children and slaughter their innocence, even today. As

true refugees, thousands have fled corrupt and violent governments. They come knocking at our borders, as they have heard the words: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”. In some ways Jesus and his family was more fortunate; they crossed the border into Egypt without being turned away, or being separated or incarcerated. Our songs of peace and public displays of charity have not erased the headlines of child poverty, gun violence, and even genocide. This is a brutal world. Today the victims are statistically less likely to be Jewish and more likely to be Hispanic, but the sounds of Rachel weeping for her children are not uncommon. If we could hear them, they would drown out our cheerful, tinny carols.

The lesson for this week is chillingly timely. The horrors we are experiencing are not new. This is, I think, part of Matthew’s point. Jesus is Emmanuel – God-with-us, and so the God we meet in Jesus is not exempt from the tension, fear, violence, and horror of our fallen world. And God’s full-on embrace of the most difficult parts of our story reminds us that this world is not just fallen but also beloved.

So, can we truly relate the flight of the Holy Family so many years ago to the plight of refugees today? There are those who look at the question of law – the argument that many refugees are flaunting the law. It is hard for me to understand this argument. Just because something is legal doesn’t mean that it is morally right, or just because something is illegal doesn’t mean that it is morally wrong. So perhaps some laws need to be changed. Just ask Martin Luther King Jr. or the apostles. “Never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was legal.”

Joseph and his little family actually did something illegal when they fled from Judea since the law demanded that all boys below the age of two should be killed, and Jesus was such a boy. As with so many refugees today, they were fleeing persecution. There is something wrong when the richest country in the world makes it legal for such refugees to be turned away to face returning to countries where they can be persecuted or even killed. Over half of the world’s refugees are children. Many of them are infants.

I once saw a woodcut depicting the Holy Family's flight to Egypt. What made this particular rendition distinct is that they were not alone. Instead, they were surrounded by a group of refugees, reminding us that in this story of forced flight, God-in-Christ identifies with all who have been driven from their homes by the threat of terror, all who are displaced by violence, and all who flee in fear with hopes for, but little assurance of, a better future.

When you think about it, Immanuel – God-with-us – wouldn't really mean all that much if it was only God with us during the tender moments, during times of celebration, during the Christmas Eve services of our lives. Yes, these moments of joy are gifts from God and it is right to give God thanks for them. But if we're glad that God is with us in times of rejoicing, we've desperate to know that God is also with us in times of grief, loss, and fear. That's why this reading is important to hear so soon after Christmas.

And also God is not only with us, God is also *for* us, promising to bring us through difficult times to the other side, if not unscathed, nevertheless still victorious. Matthew structures this passage around prophecies demonstrating that even the darkest portions of Jesus' story turn within a larger narrative of God's providence and protection. This is not to say that all these events are simply part of some larger, if darker, "plan", but rather to remind us that nothing that happens to Jesus – or, by extension, to us – is beyond the bounds of God's love and activity and cannot be redeemed and even used by God.

God is with us. And God is for us, promising not only to accompany us through difficult times but also to bring us to the other side that, in time, we might know the fullness of joy that is life in Christ. Amen.