

WHERE DO YOU GO WHEN THERE'S NO PLACE TO GO?

TEXT: Exodus 2:13-23 and Matthew 2:13-23

The Bible is an amazing collection of books, and stories. It tells us about events from many millennia ago. We learn about happenings from our own early history. More than that, it describes things that are happening today. Today's lesson does all of that.

We all know the Moses story. It was about the time that the cruel Pharaoh wanted to kill all the Hebrew baby boys because he felt there were too many of them. You know, they would grow up and become a threat to him, just by their sheer numbers. You remember that the midwives refused to comply with the killing order— a dangerous act of defiance. Moses' mom put him in a little basket of reeds and pitch and set him in the river, where he was scooped up by Pharaoh's daughter and raised as her own.

Now fast forward a few years and Moses is all grown up and he sees his Hebrew people, slaves in this foreign land of Egypt. He sees how they are oppressed. Then one day he spots an Egyptian assaulting a Hebrew worker. He was filled with both compassion and rage. He knew what was happening was not right and vowed that this abuse must stop.

It's easy to imagine Moses' train of thought. These Hebrews are my people; God has chosen me to deliver them; I am mature (he was about forty years old) and knew he had to act, He hesitated only long enough to make sure no one was looking, then he avenged the life of the Hebrew by killing the Egyptian and hiding his body in the sand.

But Pharaoh learned of the blood on Moses' hands and, of course, wanted him dead. So Moses fled from Egypt to preserve his life. In a matter of days Moses went from "The Deliverer Who is Ready to Act" to a frightened fugitive. Eventually he found refuge in the city of Midian where he lived as a refugee for forty years.

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Our reading from Matthew includes a number of parallels between Jesus and Moses, giving us a sense of Jesus as another Moses. There are several such parallels. The flight of Joseph, Mary and Jesus to Egypt to escape Herod parallels Moses being hidden in the bulrushes to escape Pharaoh, who schemed to murder infant Jewish boys to lessen Jewish power and the danger of a Jewish takeover. It also parallels Moses' flight to Midian to escape prosecution for murder.

It's difficult to imagine Joseph's reaction to the angel telling him in a dream that he must pick up Mary and their newly birthed son and take flight across the desert. King Herod had proclaimed that all baby boys two years of age or under should be killed. This brutal king had decided that this was the only way to thwart the rival to his reign, his reign of hatred and fear. So, in the dead of night, with only a donkey to transport them, the little family went the only way they knew. There were kinsmen somewhere in Egypt and perhaps they could take refuge with folks who would help them. They were alone as they fled from a scheming, hate-filled ruler whose goal was to kill as many children as possible in hopes of eliminating a tiny baby whom he feared.

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Just six months ago a picture touched hearts and souls around the world. A father and daughter lie face down in the muddy water along the banks of the Rio Grande, her tiny head tucked inside his tee-shirt, an arm draped over his neck. This portrait of desperation was captured by a journalist in the hours after Oscar Alberto Martinez Ramirez died with his 23 month old daughter, Valeria, as they tried to cross from Mexico to the United States.

This tragic picture recalled other powerful and sometimes disturbing photos that have galvanized public attention to the horrors of war and the acute suffering of individual refugees and migrants – personal stories that are often obscured by larger events. But for every migrant who chooses to make the perilous journey, whether on foot, packed into cargo trucks or on top of trains, the fear of what lies behind outweighs that which lies ahead. Some are fleeing gangs that cripple the region and kill wantonly. Others are seeking an economic lifeline.

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I have often wondered about the horrific stories we read in the Bible about ruthless rulers and baby boys dying. Why are they recorded in our scriptures? What is God trying to tell us? I have never been so sure that all of these things are about something that actually happened as historical fact. I believe that, rather, what is important is what it might be saying about God and human beings. It really matters that these children died, but that's not necessarily what the stories are about. To get the full meaning of the stories, you have to get past the babies dying.

Our newspapers are full of graphic photos like the one of Oscar Ramirez and little Valeria. In our recent history we have viewed pictures of a three-year old Syrian refugee washed up on shore. On a regular basis we see pictures of children still dying in Aleppo – and of the children killed by guns in Chicago, the children who died in Sandy Hook, and the Arapahoe and Cheyenne children who died in the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864. Our silence is full of the children dying in Haiti because they don't have clean water and in Somalia because they don't have enough food.

The story of the flight of the Holy Family depicts Jesus as a refugee fleeing a nation marked by political violence and being displaced within his own country even after some of the violence settles down. And though he avoids murder by Herod, he does not escape death by the state altogether – three decades later Pontius Pilate, an official of

the Roman Empire, pronounces Jesus' death sentence. Like Herod, Pilate does so to maintain power and remove a threat to that power.

Why is it important that the church calendar tells the story that we call the Flight into Egypt at the beginning of the Christmas season? Why should anyone care about the dates on a Christian calendar, especially in a time in which people have rightly questioned the excessive quest for power that marks some corners of the church?

The church calendar calls Christians and others to remember that we live in a world in which political leaders are willing to sacrifice the lives of the innocent on the altar of power. We are forced to recall that this is a world with families on the run, where the weeping of mothers is often not enough to win mercy for their children. More than anything, the story of the innocents calls upon us to consider the moral cost of the perpetual battle for power in which the poor tend to have the highest casualty rate.

But how can such a bloody and sad tale do anything other than add to our despair? The Christmas story must be told in the context of suffering and death because that's the only way the story makes any sense. Where else can we speak about Christmas other than in a world in which racism, sexism, classism, materialism and the devaluation of human life are commonplace? People are hurting, and the center of that hurt remains the focus of God's concern. The things that God cares about do not take place in the centers of power. The truly vital events are happening in refugee camps, detention centers, slums and prisons. The Christmas story is not set in a palace surrounded by dignitaries, but among the poor and humble whose lives are always subject to forfeit. The church finds its voice when it remembers that God "has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble", as Mary says to the angel Gabriel in the Gospel of Luke.

Moses became a refugee as a result of watching his people being brutalized by Pharaoh's cruelty. There was no where else for him to go but into unknown territory to escape Pharaoh's wrath. Being a refugee means leaving your home and seeking asylum

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Joseph listened to the angel of God, taking his small family into the unknown because he knew that God would be with them as they fled Herod's cruelty. Being a refugee means leaving your home and seeking asylum in a strange and foreign land, with the threat of severe persecution or possible death if you returned.

Refugees around the world today risk their lives in order to seek freedom and security for their families. They flee the bombs in Syria. They flee the gangs and poverty in Central America. They flee the war in Afghanistan. They flee conflict in South Sudan. There are over 70 million people, mostly children and women, displaced throughout the world. Being a refugee means leaving your home and seeking asylum in a strange and foreign land, with the threat of severe persecution or possible death if you returned.

As followers of Christ we have an obligation to minister to refugees, for these individuals are made in God's image. The Bible provides a good starting point for helping us think through how we should view all people, as well as sojourners and others among us who are vulnerable. Genesis tells that God created us in God's image – all of us. The Psalms tell us that the Lord watches over the sojourners, and upholds the widow and the fatherless. Scripture makes it clear that, whatever our policy position or political persuasion, followers of Christ should never ignore or mistreat refugees. We must see them as God sees them.

This is not the world as God planned it. This is not the world that Jesus came to serve. But it is the world as it is now. We know that even as God was with Moses as he fled Egypt, and that God was with Jesus, Mary and Joseph as they fled from Jerusalem, God lives in each of the refugees in the world today. Our job is to help the free world provide for those who are displaced, use whatever power we have to provide them with acceptance and necessities as they appear at our borders. The God of Moses, the God of

Jesus, requires no less from those who serve him. Being a refugee means leaving your home and seeking asylum in a strange and foreign land, with the threat of severe persecution or possible death if you returned. Our prayers should be that generosity and compassion prevail and that the world will recognize each person as a child of God.
Amen.