

By Bishop Dr. Munib Younan

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Scripture

Matthew 2:13-15

Now after they (the wise men) 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.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

Text Exegesis

When we think of the Christmas story, there are many familiar images that come to mind: Joseph and the greatly-pregnant Mary looking for a place to sleep in Bethlehem; the manger; the star; the wise men visiting from the East. Perhaps because it isn't represented well by our beloved nativity sets – or perhaps because it is uncomfortable to move so quickly from “Silent Night” to “flight by night” – the Holy Family's escape into Egypt is not often remembered as an integral part of our Christmas celebrations.

However, the flight into Egypt is essential to our understanding of the Christmas story, because it emphasizes that this is about much more than the birth of a baby. First, we note that in Exodus, God's people are led out of Egypt and into freedom. In Matthew, this little family is led back into Egypt, seeking safety. The reader of Matthew is invited (not so subtly!) to notice how God's work of salvation and liberation is continuing through the baby Jesus.

But this chapter of the Christmas story also reveals a political reality. The birth of this baby was a real threat to the empire. Herod didn't take kindly to foreigners arriving in his city, inquiring about a different king. It didn't help that the religious authorities in Jerusalem confirmed that yes, the awaited Messiah was expected to be born just down the road in Bethlehem. Such a threat to the power of the throne would not be tolerated. Visitors from foreign lands could not be allowed to leave thinking Herod's authority was compromised! Soon, Herod had employed these same visitors to serve his own purposes—promising to “pay homage” to this baby king, if only they would bring him news of his exact location. By any means necessary, the empire sought to put an end to the story of salvation.

The escape of the Holy Family took place in a context of political unrest, a threatened dictator, lies and abuse of power, and the promise of violence against innocent civilians – even children. Joseph didn't just wake up from a bad dream and decide to take his family on a vacation. This wasn't a career move or a travel adventure. Jesus and his family were refugees.

In Our Context

The current refugee crisis unfolding across the Middle East and Europe brings this chapter of the Christmas story, and Jesus' status as a refugee, into sharp focus. Most of the time, when news reports speak of refugees, they are imagined as a group: “hordes of refugees” or “waves of immigrants”, for example. This accurately describes the thousands upon thousands who are arriving at the borders of Germany, Norway, Greece, and other nations. The

problem is that “hordes” have no faces, and “waves” have no names. The very magnitude of the crisis makes it easier for us to dehumanize refugee men, women, and children.

Not knowing their individual circumstances, we are free to assume what is most convenient for us: that they might have made other choices. That they are taking advantage of the situation, or of the world’s hospitality. That really, if they would just return home, perhaps they could make it work.

We might as well say, “Perhaps Herod really wasn’t so bad.”

When passing such judgments on those who are seeking refuge, Western countries forget that they carry a measure of responsibility for the current crisis. The international community has failed to solve conflicts in the Middle East (and in some cases have exacerbated them). The situation today is a direct result of this failure.

The reality is that the refugees from Syria and other war-torn countries did not leave their homes by choice. They are not gathering their children, escaping by boat, and risking everything because it is convenient or fun. They were forced to go—as the Holy Family was forced to go—because of dramatic political upheaval and the very real threat of violence.

What does it mean to remember that Jesus, the one we call Savior and Lord, was himself a refugee? How might this change the way we speak about, advocate for, and welcome refugees today?

“Refugee” has never been a word without a face for me, because I myself am a refugee. My family was forced to flee their home village, Beer Sheva, in 1948 as part of the Nakba. Still today I carry a UN refugee card. My family sought refuge in Jerusalem, where they were welcomed and cared for by the Lutheran Church. The fact that I became a pastor, and now a bishop, is a direct result of the embrace my family received from Christians. These people of faith saw refugees not as problems to be solved, but as Jesus in their midst. If I had grown up in a refugee camp instead, would I have become a pastor, or a bishop? I do not know, and I simply cannot imagine.

For this reason, I never want to speak of refugee “hordes” or “waves”. These are not a crisis, or a challenge, or a demographic problem. These are human beings. These are families, with hopes and dreams for their children and for the future. These are my family. These are the Holy Family.

Questions for Discussion

1. The way we speak of refugees in the media, or in our own conversations, often dehumanizes them. Do you think it makes a difference to change the way we speak of refugees and immigrants? Of others who are marginalized? How might changing our language change our behavior as well?
2. During this holiday season, many are preparing their homes to receive family, friends, and other guests. If we see refugees as family—even as the Holy Family—how might that change the ways we receive them in our countries or our cities?
3. Would newcomers to your community recognize your church as a place of “refuge”? Why or why not?
4. The birth of Jesus was a threat to Herod, to the empire, to the status quo. Today, many see refugees as a threat. What are people afraid of? What is being threatened? Name some empires in our cultures and lives which may deserve to be challenged by the presence of the poor, the sick, or the refugee.
5. How does it change your perception of the Christmas story to think of Jesus and the Holy Family as refugees? How does it change the way you will hear/read the news of refugees today?

Prayer

Holy God, during this Christmas season when our celebrations are focused on the stable, the manger, and the star,

keep our hearts and minds on Christ Jesus. Open our eyes and ears to recognize Christ among us as the refugees of today. Show us how to help. Inspire us to speak of them as we would our own families. Give us the courage to advocate for the rights of immigrants, refugees, the oppressed, and the marginalized. Finally, we pray for peace with justice in Israel/Palestine and in the whole Middle East, that every father, mother, and child may return home to their own nation states, with human rights, and a respect for diversity. We ask this through Jesus Christ—babe in the manger, suffering servant, risen Lord, refugee. Amen.

About the Author

Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan serves as the Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL). He was consecrated as bishop—the third Palestinian to hold the office—on 5 January 1998 at the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem in the presence of religious and political leaders from many nations. Bishop Younan was the first to translate the Augsburg Confession, a key document of the Lutheran Church, into Arabic. He is an active member of various ecumenical and interfaith dialogue initiatives in Jerusalem that he helped found.

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