

The Plight of the Refugees

1-10-21

Matthew 2:13-20

Years ago the church I was serving assisted several refugee families. There was George the Czech who spoke English and translated for the other refugees. I had purchased a pair of hushpuppy shoes that had imprinting on them, "made in Poland." When I showed him the shoes he informed me that Poland at that time was dumping all their goods on the world market in order to prop up the government. I said to him, "There must be a lot of pigs in Poland to make all those shoes." He said, "yes, yes and they all work for the government." Then there was George and Wanda from Poland. They left because he had been drafted into the Polish army that was controlled by the Russians at that time. Later he told us that he left because he would not fight his own brothers. George and Wanda did not speak English but were quick learners. Robbie and I hosted them in our home for a month. Over lunch one day he gestured to me "You fish." I assumed he had seen my fishing pole in the garage and I replied, "yes." Then I gestured, "you hunt?" He nodded in the affirmative. Then I asked, "You hunt Russians?" He responded with a word I did not know he knew, "Yes, yes, no limit."

Now hear another refugee story. Into the wild and painful cold of the starless night came the refugees slowly making their way to the border. The man, stooped from age and anxiety, hurried his small family through the wind. Bearded and dark, his skin rough and cracked from the cold, his frame loomed large in spite of the slumped shoulders. He looked like a man who could take care of whatever came at them from the dark, unless of course there were too many of them. His eyes, black and alert, darted from side to side, then over his shoulder, then back again forward. Had they been seen? Had they been heard?

Every rustle of wind, every sigh from the child sent terror through his chest. Was this the way? Even the stars had been unkind, had hidden themselves in the ink of night, so that the man could not read their way. Only the wind, was it enough? Only the wind and his innate sense of direction, or were they walking in circles through the night? Their purpose, to safely make their way to the border or would they only get there to find the authorities waiting for them.

He glanced at the woman, his young bride. No more than a child herself, she nuzzled their newborn, kissing his neck. She looked up and caught his eye and smiled. Oh how the homelessness had taken its toll on her. Her eyes were red, her young face lined, her lovely hair matted from inattention, her clothes stained from milk nursing the baby, her hands chapped from the raw wind of winter. She'd hardly had time to recover from childbirth and they fled with only a little bread and the remaining wine and a very small portion of cheese.

Suddenly, the child began to make small noises. The man drew his breath in sharply. The woman quickly put the child to breast. Fear, long dread-filled moments passed. Huddled, the family stood still in the lengthy silence. At last the man breathed deeply again, reassured they had not been heard. Into the night they continued, Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus.

Ann Weems shared that refugee story.

This is part of the gospel story we often overlook. One writer noted that this scripture is the least preached text in the Bible. The nativity story informs us of the visit of the Magi, and of the first family fleeing to Egypt to keep the infant Jesus safe. My reaction to this event is similar to the Herdmens brothers in *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. Upon hearing about Herod wanting to murder Jewish babies, the oldest Herdman boy said, "Jesus has just been born and they are out to kill him." The boys wanted someone to play the role of Herod in the children's nativity play so they could beat him up.

Herod, a ruthless leader who would do anything to retain power, even kill hundreds of innocent children. He gives us insight into the gospel environment. Baby Jesus was a threat to the status quo. Life was unfair, unjust and Herod did not want it changed, was so frightened of losing power that he struck out at children. This story is a prophecy of the world's treatment of Jesus. The world will not welcome him with open arms for Jesus stands in contradiction to worldly standards, a world that caters to greed, lust and power. As the gospel writer John explained it, "He came to his own and even his own people rejected him."

Matthew includes this story as a fulfillment of a prophecy from Jeremiah, "A voice is heard in Ramah weeping and great mourning. Rachel is weeping for her children." Ramah is located a few miles south of Bethlehem and is the traditional burial site of Rachel, the wife of Jacob who was the father of the 12 tribes of Israel. Ramah was also the staging area for the deportation of the Jews to Babylon after a war. Most of their people were exiled. Soldiers organized them into caravans, chained them together and marched them away. Jeremiah is saying that at Rachel's burial place she is weeping for her children who are sent into captivity. Matthew is making a connection to that story; to Jesus who also was exiled from his homeland.

Pope Francis, in one of his Christmas homilies, quoted from this scripture and expressed sadness for those with little cause for joy because of the plight of children in areas of our world where there's conflict. He specifically mentioned children forced to be soldiers, who become victims of violence, object of trade and trafficking. He cited the 132 Pakistan children who were murdered at school. He concluded his remarks speaking for all displaced homeless people saying, "You are like Jesus." Jesus said, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

Let us go, you and I, through the starless night, through the wind and rain, to ease the cry of pain, to bring to old concerns warm sun, and bring friendship's solace to the lonely one. Let us go you and I. Let those in need know we really care, not by wishing them well but by being there. Because the bells of Christmas have rung, may love for others be our gift to the world. Come let us go; you and I.