

Refugee Jesus
Rev. Cindy Maddox
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Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

There are certain iconic photographs that most of you could bring to mind simply by hearing a description.

Marilyn Monroe in a white dress over a subway grate.

A sailor celebrating the end of World War II

by kissing a woman in the middle of Time Square.

The Black Power salute at the Olympics.

Albert Einstein sticking his tongue out.

Martin Luther King, Jr. at the March on Washington,
hand raised above the crowd.

Any of you over “a certain age” certainly know these images.

You’ve seen them so many times,

they are part of your memory and your cultural view.

Then there are the other iconic photos

that are not etched so much as *seared* into our memories.

A mushroom cloud.

A naked girl fleeing napalm during the Viet Nam War.

And more recently, a dirty brown-haired boy with blood on his face,
sitting on an orange ambulance seat.

A toddler in red shirt and navy pants face down at the edge of the water.

I say these words, and you can see the images

and you know what they represent.

A child fleeing home because home is on fire.

A child rescued from home because home is a rubble.

A child whose parents sought a new home across the sea
because home was lost to civil war.

The images that haunt us most, or at least haunt me the most,
are these images of children.

Somehow we can see adults in need and not be as moved,
as when we see the results of war, terror, and disaster
on the faces of children.

In just two weeks we will begin our annual journey toward the birth of a child
 whose story is part of our cherished memories and beliefs.
 But for today we will skip over his birth to look at what came next:
 how Jesus and his family became refugees.

I left out the worst part of the story in deference to young ears,
 so if you want to read the donut hole that we left out,
 skip back over to Matthew 2:16-18.

Suffice it to say that according to the story, the angel was right:
 Jesus' life really was in danger,
 as other parents and children soon discovered.

Historical documents tell us that King Herod was an egomaniacal tyrant
 who was terrified of losing his kingdom.

"He had to fight for several years to take control of his kingdom,
 so he never felt secure.

He maintained a private security force
 and built fortresses at [six or more places]
 so he would never be far from a defensible refuge. . . .

When he suspected intrigue in his own family,
 he killed his wife and one of his sons."¹

So although there is no historical documentation of the events of Matthew 2,
 taking the lives of innocent children is certainly consistent
 with Herod's other actions.

So Jesus' family fled political unrest and threats of violence,
 like millions of families before and since.

"There's a wonderful [and terrible] irony in the Holy Family's flight
 from Herod's egomaniacal wrath.

The one announced by angels as the 'savior'
 flees to the very land in which his own people
 had been slaves many centuries before.

The place of exodus becomes the place of safe return.

[The Rev. Dr. Jay Emerson Johnson wonders:]

Were Mary and Joseph just a bit chagrined by fleeing for their lives
 to the nation that had once tormented their people?

¹ Culpepper, R. Alan. *Feasting on the Word*, Year A Volume 1, p. 165-166.

Did they find that galling? Scary? . . .

I wonder what Mary and Joseph talked about during their flight.

Did they strategize about how they might blend in, not attract attention?

Did they muse over ancient history

and how much they really ought to despise Egyptians?

Did they worry about meeting as much violence as they were fleeing?"²

To his wonders I add my one:

Was one of Jesus' earliest memories of being hushed on the journey,
so he wouldn't give them away?

Did he remember the fear in their voices as they traveled?

Or did they know that there were others Jews living in Egypt,
and they had plans to join the diaspora there?

When they arrived, were they still looking over their shoulders,
still afraid of being followed?

Where did they stay when they arrived? Were they welcomed? Shunned?

Did they miss the sights and sounds and tastes of home?

Could they speak the language?

Were they ridiculed for being different?

Did anyone ever tell them to go back where they came from?

Was Joseph able to work or was he accused of taking someone else's job?

Did they live in fear of deportation?

Did they need a government-issued I.D. they couldn't possibly obtain?

After the death of Herod, the story says that Joseph was told in another dream
that it was safe to return to Israel.

But when he took the family back, he discovered that Herod's son was king,
and he was afraid so they had to flee yet again.

Sometimes immigrants find only temporary shelter
before having to move on.

Sometimes home comes in stages.

It is difficult for those of us who were born white in this country
to truly understand the reality of immigrants here,
let alone immigrants around the world.

Some of them, of course, simply sought a better life for their families.

² Johnson, Jay Emerson. "Learning to Love on the Flight to Egypt." <https://peculiarfaith.com/2014/12/27/learning-to-love-on-the-flight-to-egypt/>

Others of them fled for their lives, fled for the lives of their children.
 Like the poem said, you don't leave home unless home is the mouth of a shark;
 you only leave home when home won't let you stay.
 And yet our country has repeatedly struggled to provide sanctuary.
 Our policies have changed at the whim of the party in power,
 and both sides seem to operate more on what is politically feasible
 rather than what is morally right.
 A few years ago when we saw families cruelly separated at the border
 I heard so many people say "This isn't who we are."
 And American descendants of slaves reminded us, "Yes, it is."
 And when those children were housed in what amounted to cages,
 people said, "This isn't who we are."
 And Americans of Japanese descent said, "Yes it is."
 Our history is full of examples of the United States living up to its ideals
 and full of examples of us failing miserably
 because of fear, hate, and greed.
 Where we go from here is up to us.

I am so aware this morning that I edited out the hard parts of the Bible story,
 and I asked Marie to edit out the hardest parts of the poem,
 for the sake of our children who are present,
 when the children we claim to want to help
 received no editing on behalf of their sensitive ears,
 and too often no protection on their sensitive bodies.

In order to be an Immigrant Welcoming Congregation, we need to continue to
 educate ourselves about the struggles, challenges, and pain
 of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers,
 around the world, in our country,
 and in our county.

We need to hear their stories—and yet even there we must be careful.
 We cannot use other people's stories
 as what disability activists call inspiration porn.
 We cannot make other people tell us of their pain
 in order for us to decide if they're worthy.
 We cannot appropriate their pain
 to make us feel good for helping.

Like many things, it is a balance.

We don't grow by refusing to listen,
but we don't grow by refusing to speak, either.

Joseph had dreams that warned him of danger.

Can we imagine the dreams that modern-day Josephs could have,

“the dream of a world where, instead of having to flee,
the refugee family would find itself at last welcome and secure.”³

How can we help such dreams come to life?

For this worship service we chose to sing some of our hymns in other languages.

Since Spanish is the language of most immigrant families in our town,

we chose the familiar *Santo Santo* chorus as a response
to each short presentation we made today.

I think it's appropriate to help us immerse ourselves in the differentness
and to speak in the language of those we want to welcome.

On the other hand, I wonder if we also should hear our own familiar songs
through the lens of the immigrant.

If we had fled violence and poverty in another country,
how would it feel to sing:

“Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come!
Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, & grace will lead me home.”

If our bodies had been attacked and abused on our way to freedom,
could we sing:

“When peace, like a river, attendeth my way;
when sorrows like sea billows roll;
whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say:
‘It is well, it is well with my soul!’”

And if we were still traveling through the wilderness, the forest, the desert,
afraid of what was ahead but even more afraid of what was behind,
how would it sound to sing:

“Precious Lord, take my hand; lead me on, help me stand.
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light.
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.”

³ Troeger, Thomas. *Feasting on the Word Year A*, Volume 1, p. 169.