

Refugees in Our Midst

Fleeing from danger, finding a home

By DENISE SIMEONE

Tag, you're it!

When I was growing up in Ohio I played a variety of games with neighborhood kids and cousins. A common one was hide and seek tag. One person was the chaser or *it* and tried to tag someone else. There was a place, usually a tree trunk or a pole called *safe* or *home*. It was a place where you could run to, touch it, and catch your breath before you went out running again.

I was reminded of this game and its focus on the role of a safe place when I read the first chapters of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew begins his infancy narrative differently than Luke; in fact, this is the only Gospel where we hear about the dreams of Joseph. In Matthew, Joseph plays a pivotal role by showing fidelity to God's call as he protects Mary and her newborn child.

Perhaps as we delve into these initial chapters of Matthew, we catch a glimpse of our role and responsibility in the world. As we anticipate or begin this liturgical new year, let us explore three related passages.

Joseph's dreams

On the Fourth Sunday of Advent and during the Christmas Vigil Mass, the church proclaims the story of Joseph's troubling discernment. In the first of four dreams, Joseph receives a message by an angel that Mary, his betrothed, is with child. A righteous man who wanted to avoid exposing her and himself to shame, he sought to divorce this young and pregnant woman. But, as God would have it, the angel told him that this unborn child to be named Emmanuel, *God is with us*, was destined for greatness. As the passage reveals, Joseph awoke and took Mary into his home, thereby offering the mother and child security and protection (cf. Matthew 1:18-25).

On the feast of the Holy Family, observed this year on Friday, December 30, we hear another dream encouraging Joseph to escape with his family to



— Julie Lonneman

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(Leviticus 19:34)*

Egypt, thereby avoiding King Herod's ominous plan.

Now after they 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. So Joseph, Mary and Jesus departed by night to Egypt. (Matthew 2:13-15)

Through yet another dream, God endows Joseph with the knowledge that the cruel Herod was dead. With this message, an angel ensures him that he may return to Israel, but should resettle in another area, a place of sanctuary where they can avoid Archelaus' (Herod's son) evil reign:

"Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel ... And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee ... (cf. Matthew 2:19-23)

In Matthew's Gospel, Joseph arranged a series of journeys and stopping places that would be home for Jesus, Mary and himself. With each new place, he created a safe haven: a home where they could be spared the upheaval and fear that existed in the world around them. Through his courageous efforts, he protected them from the elements, from danger, from tyrants and most importantly, from death. Under his care, they were safe.

To be sure, Joseph chose not to abandon those entrusted to his care. Instead, he put himself in the role of a protector and shield. He embraced Mary, the child Jesus, and brought them to safety. His family became strangers in a foreign land, refugees in need of shelter and protection. As this story has been told throughout the centuries, it is often called "The Flight to Egypt." Although we may be left wondering who welcomed them into their new surroundings, a more important question might be: How



and where is this ancient story being played out today?

During the octave of Christmas, we proclaim yet another story with Herod. In this account, his reign of terror brings many vulnerable children to their gruesome end:

When Herod realized that he had been deceived by the magi, he became furious. He ordered the massacre of all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had ascertained from the magi. Then was fulfilled what had been said through Jeremiah the prophet: “A voice was heard in Ramah, sobbing and loud lamentation; Rachel weeping for her children, and she would not be consoled, since they were no more.” (Matthew 2:16-18)

This passage is proclaimed on a day called *The Feast of the Holy Innocents*. Christian churches throughout the world remember these innocent victims of senseless violence. These slaughtered children are called martyrs, a term reserved for those who have died for their faith. In fact, they are considered the first Christian martyrs.

No escaping faces of the lost

We have all seen images and heard stories of refugees who are fleeing their homeland. Just as Joseph heard the message to “get up, take the child and flee,” hundreds of thousands of parents across the globe have realized that the only way to protect their family is to leave their country of origin. As they travel to far-off lands escaping danger and destruction, they seek a better life for their helpless families. Sad is the fate of countless children wrenched from their homeland or from their mother’s arms, who vanish on the way to safe passage or are lost from their father’s grip. Haunting images of modern-day “holy innocents” leave us paralyzed and without words: the blood-soaked five-year-old injured child, Omran Daqneesh, from the Syrian city of Aleppo; the body of three-year-old, Aylan Kurdi, washed up on a Turkish beach; the nameless, drowned infant cradled in the arms of a

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German rescuer. That rescuer, himself a father of three and a music therapist by profession, is quoted as saying: “I began to sing to comfort myself and to give some kind of expression to this incomprehensible, heart-rending moment. Just six hours ago this child was alive.” The German humanitarian organization, SeaWatch, which supports the safe and legal passage of migrants offered this statement: “If we do not want to see such pictures we have to stop producing them” (www.humanrightsatsea-news.org/2016/05/).

Should we turn away our faces from this horror? Even if we did, could we deny that the ground beneath tens of thousands of displaced persons runs bloody red throughout the world? Are there not “innocents” being martyred today? Though God is surely walking with them in their suffering and death, what is our humanitarian response to this tragic situation?

We must turn our eyes to these refugees, hear their stories and cry with their anguished families. The children in our very midst are being slaughtered, yes, by tyrannical regimes, but also by the apathy, ignorance and even absolute bigotry and intolerance that pervades predominantly Western nations and their people.

By records kept by the United Nations, *65.3 million people* were displaced in 2015. One in every 113 persons of the world’s 7 billion people are refugees – displaced and fleeing to find safety.

As we listen to the proclamation of Matthew’s familiar Christmas story this year, what will resonate in our hearts? Will we hear the passage as

just a story? Or, will we see this as part of our *shared* story, one where we have a pivotal role in caring for those in danger and without homes?

Aliens in a strange land

Recently while taking a cab in Chicago I spoke with a driver who was born in Palestine. In the context of our fascinating conversation, he told me about the hospitality offered to the pilgrims who had gathered in Bethlehem when Pope John Paul II visited in 2000. The sheer number overwhelmed the hotels. He said that the people living in Bethlehem opened their homes to travelers out of pure hospitality, mostly free of charge, because the townspeople believed it was the right thing to do. He said that the concept of Bethlehem being a sacred place “is still running in the veins of the people there.”

He also recounted the story of his father, a Palestinian refugee, who was received into Brazil in 1948. He expressed deep gratitude for the Brazilians and the countries at that time who were willing to welcome persons displaced by the war with Israel. He said his family is eternally indebted, and even as he has found a home in the United States with his own family, that gratitude runs deep in his approach to all refugees today.

His story confirmed that having a first-hand experience of being displaced – as difficult and desperate as that ordeal might be – can lead to heart-filled gratefulness. But his gratitude to Brazil and her people made me wonder. What countries will be remembered with gratitude in twenty years by the desperate refugees uprooted by the war in Syria, or by those caught in inescapable violence in Central America, or by those trapped by vicious gangs in some Mexican cities, or even by those from today’s Palestine, still torn by conflict and genocide?

When further exploring this topic, I turned to the dictionary to look up the words migrant and refugee. It led me further to the word *alien* and its definition. This exploration brought to mind a mandate that informs our Judeo-Christian tradition and code of conduct:



You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the LORD, am your God. (Leviticus 19:34)

Were not Mary, Joseph and the child Jesus foreigners, strangers, migrants, refugees, *aliens*? As we acknowledge the plight of the Holy Family during this Christmas season, can we also see the face of God in the undocumented, the refugee, the stranger in our midst?

Compassionate response

During a visit in 2016 to the Greek island of Lesbos, Pope Francis knew it was a place of great pain for refugees. On his flight from Rome to Greece, he told reporters that “This is a trip marked by sadness and that’s important. It’s a sad trip. We are going to meet so many people who suffer, who don’t know where to go, who were forced to flee, and we are also going to a cemetery – the sea, where so many have drowned.”

While in Greece, Francis, along with the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople and Archbishop Ieronymos II of Athens, reportedly spent more time greeting refugees individually than they did giving speeches. Through their compassionate example, they demonstrated to the citizens of world that actions speak louder than words.

Patriarch Bartholomew, the spiritual leader of the world’s Orthodox Christians, told the refugees, “We have wept as we watched the Mediterranean Sea becoming a burial ground for your loved ones. We have wept as we witnessed the sympathy and sensitivity of the people of Lesbos and other islands. But we have also wept as we saw the hard-heartedness of our fellow brothers and sisters – your fellow brothers and sisters – close borders and turn away ... The world will be judged by the way it has treated you.”

Similarly, Francis told those interned at the Moria refugee camp that he wanted to be with them and to hear their stories. As he departed Greece, Francis accompanied three families of refugees from the camp back to Rome for their resettlement.

Two months later, nine more arrived. In these acts of hospitality, Francis revealed the embodiment of mercy by welcoming the stranger to their new home, a place of safety and refuge.

In the month that followed, he did even more to challenge us in his role as a compassionate spiritual leader. On May 26, 2016, Pope Francis was given the life jacket of a young girl who had drowned. Oscar Camps, founder of a non-profit Spanish organization that attempts to rescue migrants caught at sea, said the following when offering the life jacket to the Pope: “Each boatload of people has a dramatic tale to tell... families are separated, orphaned children who lost their parents along the way now find themselves in a strange country, a continent that is not their own, and no one to help them.”

Within days after his meeting with Camps, Francis spoke to a group of Italian youth while holding the girl’s life jacket. Ann Schneible of the Catholic New Agency documented this gathering:

“Let us think of this little girl: what was her name? I do not know: a little girl with no name,” the pontiff said, according to Vatican Radio’s translation. “Each of you give her the name you would like, each in his heart. She is in heaven; she is looking on us.”

As he explained the encounter with Oscar Camps, Schneible recounts:

“He brought me this jacket,” the pontiff said ... “and with tears in his eyes he said to me, ‘Father, I couldn’t do it – there was a little girl on the waves, and I did all I could, but I couldn’t save her: only her life vest was left.’”

“I do not (tell you this because I) want you to be sad, but (because) you are brave and you (should) know the truth: they are in danger – many boys and girls, small children, men, women – they are in danger,” he said.

At that same event, money for the children of Lesbos was presented to Francis from the children of a school in Vibo Marina. They signed a letter stating:

“We children promise that we will welcome anyone who arrives in our country ... we shall never consider anyone who has a different skin color, or who speaks a different language, or who professes a different religion from ours, a dangerous enemy.”

A simple yet radical act of solidarity by children. Could we sign such a letter? Would we make such a promise?

The work of our hearts

Throughout the centuries, humanity has been in search for places of safety, places where human dignity is extended equally to all, regardless of language, skin color, religion and country of origin. The infancy narrative, as documented in the Gospel of Matthew, shows that the first years of the Holy Family were spent as refugees, strangers seeking sanctuary. The scriptural tale of the holy innocents is a grim reminder of how the young and vulnerable suffered and continue to live in grave danger.

Unlike the childhood game of tag where home base is easily within reach, the plight of refugees involves fleeing persecution, often moving across long expanses of rough waters and treacherous terrain. *Aliens* in a strange land seek places where their families can flourish, not perish. Our God tells us what we must do – love.

It is grave yet sacred work to create safety – a place where we allow others to catch their breath, find their footing, and make their own bold move away from a place of safety outward into our world. If we are to create sanctuary for others – whether it is for a new co-worker, a new next-door neighbor, or literally, those seeking asylum because of the terror they face in their homeland, we must do the work of love. And the first place must be in our own hearts.

Mindful of the words of Leviticus, we must love and show care for those who are displaced for we, too, have walked as strangers – aliens – in foreign lands. Create a safe place.

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