

SEEKING REFUGE

Matthew 1: 18-25, Matthew 2: 13-23

Have you ever had to move? According to global statistics, Canadians are among the most frequent movers in the world. No doubt given we are a nation of immigrants that makes sense. But even for those of us Canadians who have been here multi-generationally, moving from place to place and home to home, will be something we will have done at least several times in our lifetimes on average. Another statistic that's interesting and one that many of us will know from firsthand experience is that moving has been identified near the top of the list of causes of stress in people's lives. I know the last time I moved I contracted shingles throughout my body. Not knowing what it was I went to the doctor who told me what it was and that given that I was still young and healthy it must have been caused by stress. Go figure.

So what are the reasons so many of us move? Sure there is always the desire for something more and better, for ourselves and our families. We move because of work, because of schools for our children and communities we are drawn to be a part of. There are also economic reasons we move. We either upscale or downscale as the size of our families changes. We also move at certain times of our lives when we have suffered a loss of some kind, when there is a break up of a marriage relationship or our health has deteriorated and we need to downsize.

But there are also other reasons we move, and reasons that are a matter of life and death. The Christmas story in our gospels is all about love, yes... But as many of us know, love can pressure us to have to do all kinds of things for our families and those we care about, and that includes having to move because it's a matter of life and death. And this, my friends, is very much the Christmas story we're given in our gospels and it's a story that is as relevant today as it was 2,000 years ago.

And in order to get at this story and what it means, let me tell a story from today, a refugee story as it has been shared by a woman named: Flora Terah. Flora came to Canada from Kenya 15 years ago. She's an author, public speaker and an ambassador for an organization called: ShelterBox Canada. Her focus through this organization is ending violence and bullying toward women and children, seeking to create peaceful environments locally and beyond borders.

So why did Flora move to Canada? Was it for economic reasons for herself and her family? Was it for a change of scenery? No. Like many who seek refuge among us here in Canada, Flora came to escape serious threats of violence and death from her Kenyan homeland. But here's the thing. On the outside, Kenya is a country of wealth in natural and mineral resources, a country of vast opportunity. And yet, for many people and especially women and girls, Kenya is a nation of vast poverty and threat of safety. Flora worked as a social worker for two decades. She worked with women in poverty and in refugee camps, and the stories they shared were

horrific. At one point Flora felt she was just trying to put band aids on massive wounds and not really addressing the root problems. And so she decided to run for public office. She was well-known and popular in her community and she had great odds of being voted in as a member of Parliament. But then, the threats came. If she didn't pull out of the running there would be violence and harm. Flora persisted. And then she was assaulted, severely. She ended up in hospital for weeks, and she was so incapacitated that she could not continue to run for public office. But she refused to give up. This is when her only child was attacked and murdered. Flora was broken. The people who were out to see her ruined would never stop. She was a threat to a system of corruption and violence that served a minority elite. Either she escaped or she would be terminated.

Now I know this is the last thing many of us want to think about as we prepare to celebrate Christmas. But this is the gospel story of Christmas we get whether we like it or not. We can dress it up with tinsel and ornaments, but if we want our Christmas celebration to be a true celebration and enjoyment of the gift of love rather than some commercial escape from reality, let's open our hearts a little trusting that, as Jesus says, the truth shall set us free.

Before I share a little more about how the truth set Flora free, let's dive into our Christmas story a little more as the gospels give it to us. The story of Mary's conception of the child to be born as Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us and saviour of his people, is a story of peril and threat. If you read the whole story in several gospel accounts you see that Mary and Joseph have to move and move quickly. Why? In one version the danger is from a tyrant named Herod who feels threatened by this child to be born. He is willing to murder as many children as is necessary to get the one child who threatens his rule. So Joseph and Mary must run and run for their lives. They have to relocate several times until they find a home and community that is safe enough to stay.

Another version of the story in Luke tells of Joseph and Mary having to relocate for economic reasons. Even though Joseph is originally from Bethlehem, he has to move because the land that is his family's from generations past is taken from him and he must move himself and his family far away north to a place called Galilee in search of work and income to survive. He comes back to Bethlehem for reasons of a census but cannot afford any place to stay, even though it was once home. And so his only option is to camp in a barn with animals because that's all the room there is. It's not a tent in a park but it's not far off either.

And finally, we have one of our readings this evening which tells us a lot if we pay close attention to what is being said and the context of Joseph's and Mary's world in the Palestine of 2000 years ago. Mary is pregnant and we're told in advance that the child to be born is conceived from the Holy Spirit. But who in their right minds would believe such a thing? Were Mary to tell her family and community that the child in her is from the Holy Spirit what do you think would be the response? And Joseph? What is he to imagine? Was Mary violated

somehow? Is there someone else in the picture he doesn't know about? We're told that the threat of public shame for Mary and for Joseph as a man willing to continue the engagement would be significant. How are they to survive this without having to leave their community? How is Joseph supposed to embrace Mary and this child even though he has not been the one to conceive this child with Mary? Joseph may believe his dream because he wants to, but who will be convinced by a dream?

You see the challenges? Joseph's integrity is in choosing Mary and this child over the public shame he must endure along with Mary and the child, and Joseph must plan a move for reasons of threat for a variety of reasons depending on which part of the story we look at. There is threat of violence and murder, there is economic hardship that is life and death survival and there is the kind of public shame that would isolate and crush them if they didn't move and move quickly seeking a new life and fresh identity.

And this, my friends is the story of so many who flee as refugees in our world today as much as it was the story of people then. By entering the world as a child within such a family in such circumstances, Emmanuel - God with us, wants to reveal to us that as followers of this child Jesus, our salvation, our journey toward ever greater wholeness, must involve our compassionate solidarity with all those who are seeking refuge in a time where our politics want to put up all kinds of walls to keep people out.

So what about Flora? How can her story like the story of so many others move our hearts this Christmas to open up to a deeper message of love?

Flora came to Canada as a refugee and was accepted. She became involved not only with the local refugee community from Africa, but also got work with an organization that sought to provide support and advocacy for women and girls in Africa. She became a public speaker and her profile was growing. But the Flora that functioned on the outside was not the Flora that was traumatized and hurting on the inside. She was struggling to hold it together as all she had suffered and lost kept clawing at her soul. Things became so dire that Flora began harming herself in various ways. At one point she had a panic attack and ended up in hospital.

The thing many of us fail to realize is that people come to Canada and carry all kinds of pain, loss and trauma. If moving is not bad enough and learning to live in a whole new world is not difficult enough, having to make peace with all one has lived, suffered and lost is a whole other level of challenge. In Flora's words: "I discovered that shutting in pain, wearing cosmetic smiles and exhibiting false confidence only destroys you in the end. We need to understand that the suitcases newcomers come with are not just physical ones. They have other pieces of baggage that no one sees. I had post-traumatic stress disorder. Hugs, words of support, and comfort while beautiful and important were not enough. I also needed medical attention."

Thankfully, since that time, Flora has come a long way. She has now integrated a lot of mental health know how and support in her work of advocacy for women and girls. Things have also begun to change in many parts of Africa including Kenya. And yet, even in Canada, the crisis in violence and harm toward women and girls is something many have called: epidemic.

But there is hope. There is always hope, and Christmas is all about hope. Jesus not only survives along with his family, but he rises up and uses his experience to grow into his identity as Messiah of God. The little child born in utter vulnerability and threat will grow up to stand against the powers of oppression and open up pathways to spiritual transformation through healing love and regenerative communion.

So what is the message for us here and now? Some of us here know something of Flora's journey in some way. Some of us are refugees and some of us are first generation immigrants. Others of us are multi generation Canadians who continue to give thanks for the wonderful experiment that is Canada, a cultural and inter-cultural gathering of peoples who pride ourselves for being united in our diversity. And even as we are continuing to seek out healing toward reconciliation with first peoples of this land, and even as we continue to call out gender-based violence and injustice for all those marginalized, may we also feel joy and the gift of privilege of having family and home here ready to celebrate and give thanks this Christmas.

Prayer: Come to us afresh this Christmas, O Christ... May you find a home among us and in our hearts... May we take the time to give thanks in meaningful ways through our compassion and generosity and service... and our laughter and tears and joy too... Amen.