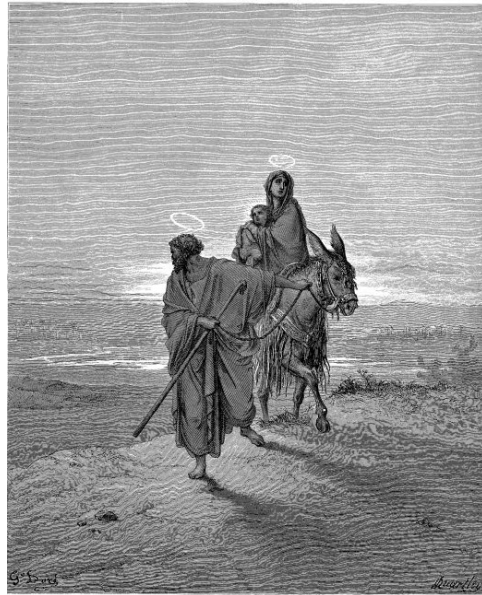


REFUGEES

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, December 27, 2015 – Christmas I
Higganum and Haddam Congregational Churches
Making Disciples. Making a Difference.*

Text: Matthew 2:13-26

Now after [the magi] 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.



When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that



he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”¹

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “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. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

1Images: *Flight into Egypt*, Gustav Doré (http://www.wikiart.org/en/gustave-dore/the-flight-into-egypt?utm_source=returned&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=referral); *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, Luc Merson (<http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/rest-on-the-flight-into-egypt-31734>); NY Times photo of Afghan family mourning the death of their youngest child in a refugee camp in Kabul, Afghanistan during the bitterly cold winter of 2011-2012; *Rachel Weeping for Her Children*, Sondra L Jonson, <http://www.sljonsonstudios.com/christian-and-liturgical-sculpture/rachel-weeping-for-her-children.php>.

The magi in Matthew's nativity narrative weren't really kings. They were sages—a kind of hybrid between a priest and an astronomer. There weren't necessarily three of them—there could have been three or four or five or even more of them—Matthew simply says “wise men from the East.” By the time they got to Bethlehem, the shepherds were long gone, the Holy Family was living in a house, and Jesus was no longer an infant.

On their way to pay homage to Jesus, these Gentile wise men had to stop in Jerusalem to ask for directions to the birthplace of the “King of the Jews.” They had no Siri in their smartphones, only a star which brought them as far as Jerusalem, where their first encounter was with Herod the Great. This particular Herod, though he was not himself a Jew, had been given the title “King of the Jews” by the Roman emperor 35 years earlier, when he was granted the authority to rule over Palestine on behalf of Rome. (Imagine what might have been going through Herod's mind when these “wise men” told him they were seeking the child who had been *born* the King of the Jews.)

The long journey of these sophisticated seekers brought them to Bethlehem, a town whose name means “house of bread.” Bethlehem was where Rachel had died while giving birth to her son Benjamin. It was where Ruth had gleaned in the fields of Boaz. It was where David had been anointed king and where Jesus was born. At the time of Jesus' birth, Bethlehem, like all of Judea, was occupied by Roman military forces. Bethlehem today is part of the West Bank, a Palestinian territory occupied by Israeli military forces.

Following Herod's instructions, the wise men from the east searched diligently for the “young child”(KJV), and found him and his parents in a home in Bethlehem, where they were “overwhelmed with joy” and offered those gifts most rare that they had carried with them for many months.

Herod, of course, had no intention of *worshipping* the child who had been born king of the Jews. He was intent on *destroying* this child. Which is why God warned the wise men in a dream to go home by another way. Which is why God warned Joseph in a dream to flee with his family to Egypt.

One family fleeing their homeland to escape from persecution does not a global refugee crisis make. But it is nonetheless a crisis for that one family—which, in the narrative of Matthew, happens to be the Holy Family. The first-century Middle Eastern family of Mary and Joseph and the child Jesus became refugees in Egypt, just as hundreds of thousands of twenty-first-century Middle Eastern families have become refugees in Europe.

Matthew's Gospel says nothing about what refugee life in Egypt was like for Joseph and Mary and their little son. Two thousand years ago, national borders and national security concerns were nothing like they are today, so I surmise that the experience of the Holy Family in Egypt was unremarkable—even though their ethnicity and religious identity made them strangers in a land that had once welcomed, and then enslaved, their ancestors.

Today's global community is facing an international refugee crisis on a scale not seen since the end of World War II in Europe. Today's global community is also facing an international terror threat from the so-called Islamic State and its far-flung sympathizers. Today's refugees from Syria and Iraq are caught between a rock and a hard place: fleeing terror and violence in their home countries, they encounter suspicion and hostility in their host countries.

The primary responsibility for addressing both the refugee crisis and the terror threat lies with the governments of many countries. But there are some concrete things that we as individuals and congregations can do in 2016 to help refugee families. Here are three ways in which we can fulfill the biblical mandate to “extend hospitality to strangers” (Rom 12:13):

First, we can counter the hateful rhetoric toward Muslims that is taking up so much space in our political discourse. Hateful rhetoric can have tragic consequences: we've seen a significant spike in assaults on individual Muslims and on mosques, not only in reaction to the mass shootings in Paris and San Bernardino, but also in response to the incendiary anti-Muslim rhetoric of Donald Trump and others. Not only does this kind of rhetoric stoke people's fears; it also fuels their anger. As Christians, we need to unequivocally condemn the hateful anti-Muslim rhetoric that is poisoning our political discourse and fomenting violence.

Second, we can make financial contributions to grassroots organizations that are providing direct assistance to refugees in Europe. If you'd like to have a sense of personal connection with refugee assistance, visit this website: www.thecompassioncollective.org. Here you can make a small donation—the maximum donation they'll accept is \$25—and here's what the Compassion Collective will do with the donations they receive:

“For refugees navigating choppy, cold seas off the Greek islands, [they'll] provide floodlights to light up those waters at night, funding for volunteers to pull [frightened] children to shore, blankets and warm weather gear to help [families] survive the winter. For refugees stuck stateless in Europe, [they'll] provide basic necessities—food, shelter, warm clothing and hygiene products to give people back a measure of dignity and comfort.

“For refugee parents, [they'll] be providing their most requested item—strollers and baby slings. These gifts keep their children safe and cradled close while they journey. [They'll] also provide emotional care for children, translators to help separated families find each other, doctors [and nurses] for the sick and injured, and much more.”²

²<http://www.thecompassioncollective.org/>.

Third, we can participate in, and contribute to, the Middletown Refugee Resettlement Coalition, which is planning to co-sponsor three refugee families in Middletown. This Coalition is made up of representatives of Muslim, Jewish, Christian, and Unitarian faith communities, as well as persons who are participating on behalf of themselves and/or their families.

Refugee resettlement, which has not been a contentious issue in American public life until the recent mass shootings in Paris and San Bernardino, is a complicated process. First and foremost, any refugee family wanting to be resettled in North America has to undergo the most thorough and rigorous screening and background checks of anyone wanting to travel to the United States. This vetting process typically takes 18 to 24 months.

Once a refugee family has been approved by the State Department for resettlement, their case is assigned to one of several national non-profit or faith-based organizations, which in turn refers the family to a local resettlement agency (which in our area is IRIS in New Haven—Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services).

This referral often comes on short notice (two to four weeks), which means that a co-sponsoring group has to be well-prepared and nimble to rent and fully furnish an apartment, provide weather-appropriate clothing, arrange for transportation from New Haven, prepare a culturally appropriate hot meal, and stay in close contact with the family for the first three to six months of their transition.

The first priority of the refugee resettlement process is to help families become self-sufficient by the end of their first six months in their new home. As soon as a family arrives, they are expected to participate in intensive acculturation, language, and employment training. A combination of state and federal funds, along with funds raised locally by the co-sponsoring organization, helps the family with rent, utilities, food, clothing, transportation, and health care for their first three months. The Community Foundation of Middlesex County has set up a “Welcoming Middletown Fund” on behalf of the Coalition, which will need to raise \$9,000 (\$3,000 for each family) for our local contribution.

I'm anticipating that within the next month or two, our Refugee Resettlement Coalition will give the “green light” to IRIS, letting them know we are ready to welcome a refugee family, or families, to Middletown. Once this happens, we will put out a call to local congregations to help furnish apartments for refugee families.

The biblical narrative of the refugee family of Joseph and Mary and Jesus doesn't tell us what life was like for this family in Egypt. I think we can assume, based on Matthew's portrayal of Joseph, that if anything bad was going to happen to the family, God would have warned Joseph in a dream. It's certainly clear throughout the narrative that God is looking out for this family.

It's clear to me from today's refugee crisis that God is calling us as people of faith to look out for refugee families in whatever ways feel good and right to us. We can't solve this crisis on our own—that's the responsibility of governments around the world. But we can surely be part of the solution. For me at least, one of the ways not to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of this crisis is to join with other people of goodwill to focus on the opportunity to help a few families become part of our neighborhood.

As we stand today on the threshold of a new calendar year, I'd like to close out this calendar year with words of wisdom from Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, written shortly before he was assassinated in 1980.

"It helps now and then, to step back and take the long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

"We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

"We plant the seeds that one day will grow," Romero continued. "We lay foundations that will need further development.

"We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning . . . an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest."³

May this new calendar year be a time when we can do something for a refugee family, and do it very well. Though our efforts may be incomplete, they will still be a beginning. More importantly, our efforts can create an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest. Let us not neglect this opportunity to show hospitality to strangers, realizing that in so doing, we will be entertaining angels unawares.

³Cited by Talitha Arnold, "I Had Planned," http://act.ucc.org/site/MessageViewer?em_id=58284.0&dlv_id=80186.