

Jesus Will Meet You in the Place to Which You Have Fled
Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

Rev. Dr. Mark E. Yurs
Salem United Church of Christ
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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." Mt. 2:19-20

We are all refugees this year.

I do not wish to diminish the real plight and real desperation of people who are real refugees. According to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Refugees are people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country."¹ There are 79.5 million people around the world who have been forced to leave their homes. Nearly 26 million of those are refugees, and half of those are under eighteen years of age. Many left with only the clothes they were wearing, and so they are without possessions, jobs, and, in some cases, their families.

We are not that kind of refugee, but we are refugees in some sense of the term this year. The Coronavirus has forced us to flee into seclusion. We are not where we want to be. We are not in church. We are not with our children, our grandchildren, or our elderly parents. Trips have been cancelled, parties have been called off, and every move – even one as simple as going to the grocery store – is calibrated to keep us safe from getting sick. Even the home is not as we would have it be. It has to double now as a school and an office – simultaneously – as well as a place to live, relax, unwind, and recuperate. We are not like those who have only a blanket from Church World Service, but life is limited. Life is restricted. We are not where we want to be.

So turn with me to The Gospel According to Matthew and find there a refugee family whose experience can help us understand our own. I refer, of course, to Mary and Joseph and their child, Jesus.

Mary and Joseph were not where they wanted to be.

They were forced to be in Bethlehem for the birth of their baby. The government had them on the move for the sake of a census. They had to leave Nazareth, a place where they were relatively comfortable, and go to Bethlehem. Even in Bethlehem they were not where they wanted to be. The village was crowded and they were compelled to find shelter in a barn, and that is where Mary delivered her baby. He wasn't placed in the crib they had ready for him, one which Joseph may have made with his own hands. His first bed had to be a manger, a feedbox, just enough to keep him off the cold ground.

¹ This definition and the facts that immediately follow are from "What is a refugee?" The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, www.unhcr.org. Accessed December 12, 2020.

Mary and Joseph were forced to flee Bethlehem and cross the international border into Egypt shortly after the birth of Jesus. They had to flee because they had to get away from something dangerous and deadly. They had to flee Herod, who was no one to be messed with. History remembers Herod more for his cruelty than for his governing ability. He was as likely as not to have people killed. He had had one of his wives executed, at least two of his sons, a brother-in-law, and political rivals. He even wished to have a number of Jews rounded up when he died and then killed so that there would be mourning in Israel, not rejoicing.² Herod was a cruel man, and the flight into Egypt after hearing threatening news concerning Herod was a wise move that kept the Holy Family safe.

They were not where they wanted to be, and they had to remain refugees indefinitely. We do not know how long the Holy Family had to stay in Egypt. It may not have been long, for Herod seems to have died shortly after the birth of Jesus. Even so, it was long enough to be disruptive to their lives. There may have been other Jews in Egypt at the time, so Mary and Joseph may have found community,³ still they were foreigners in a foreign land. It was not their home and it was not their language. And there was an economic barrier as well, for Joseph had no customers for his carpentry business in Egypt, at least none like the clientele he had built up in Nazareth and perhaps in Bethlehem.

Mary and Joseph – clearly – were not where they wanted to be.

God was with them were they were.

One of scripture's clear teachings is that God doesn't lose sight of people. Psalm 121, one of the psalms of ascent, a psalm Blackwood called "The Traveler's Psalm"⁴ and which we might now think of as a psalm for refugees, tells of the watchfulness of the Lord, a watchfulness that never ceases. The psalm ends,

The Lord will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore. (Ps. 121:8)

Or there is Psalm 139 with its famous question:

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast. (Ps. 139:7-10)

² See F. F. Bruce, "Herod," *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. by J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 521-522; "Herod," in *The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. by Henry Snyder Gehman (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), p. 379-382; and S. Sandmal, "Herod (Family)," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 2, ed. by George A. Buttrick, et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), p. 585-595.

³ "Jesus Christ," in *The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 482.

⁴ Andrew W. Blackwood, *This Year of Our Lord* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1943), p. 184.

The truth captured in these and other psalms is the lived experience of Bible persons. God found Noah adrift on the flood; God found Moses in hiding in Midian; God found Elijah in his depression under the Juniper bush; and God found Mary and Joseph in their refugee status in Egypt.

God's way of being with this couple in Egypt was consistent with God's way of being with them before. Matthew shows us this through the lens of Joseph's experience. Back in Nazareth, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream to say Mary could be trusted that the child she was carrying was of the Holy Spirit, not some other man (Mt. 1:20). In Bethlehem it was an angel of the Lord who appeared to Joseph in a dream, telling him to flee to Egypt for safety (Mt. 2:13). It was an angel of the Lord who appeared to Joseph in a dream while they were in Egypt to tell him it was safe to return to Israel (Mt. 2:19). And it was a warning through a dream that guided Joseph not to Bethlehem in Judea but to Nazareth in Galilee (Mt. 2:22). Always the pattern was the same – an angel in a dream, an angel in a dream, an angel in a dream. Everything was different in Egypt, but God's way of speaking and guiding and relating was wholly the same. Nothing had changed of what was highest and best.

We can bring this out of the Bible and find it in the life of someone nearer our own time. Beethoven was a gifted pianist, a virtuoso whose performances thrilled all who heard him play.⁵ But a growing deafness started to befall him, taking him where he did not want to be. His archives still hold the conversation books he carried with him. Those who had something to say to him would write it in one of these books for him to read and respond. I am told his house in Bonn is now a museum and in it are any number of ear trumpets – the hearing aids of the day. They range in size from a matter of inches to a matter of feet. Together the collection of ear trumpets show how desperate this man was to hear.⁶ He tried to play at a rehearsal, and it was pathetic. He tried to direct an orchestra, and it was a disaster. Beethoven was not where he wanted to be and it nearly drove him to suicide. But God had not left him. There was still music in his soul. Everything had changed but this was still the same. He composed. He never heard his compositions performed; he only heard them in his head. But, according to one music scholar, "Year after silent year [Beethoven] continued to compose masterpieces which . . . increased . . . in musical excellence.

Perhaps I am getting ahead of myself. Let's go back to the text. Mary and Joseph were not where they wanted to be but God was with them where they were. And now this.

God led Mary and Joseph into a new future.

The threat from Herod passed. The door back into their old life re-opened and they were permitted to leave their refugee status and return to their homeland.

Their original plan was to return to Bethlehem. That is where they had been most recently. They presumably had developed some connections there. It was Joseph's ancestral home. They were planning to go back to what that had most recently known. But they were redirected to Nazareth instead of Bethlehem, to Galilee in the north and not Judea in the south.

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, the facts reported here about Beethoven are from Patrick Kavanaugh, *The Spiritual Lives of Great Composers* (Nashville: Sparrow Press, 1992), p. 35ff.

⁶ James S. Stewart, *The Wind of the Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), p. 33-34.

The return to Nazareth - - to Mary's ancestral home - - proved favorable. Nazareth made for a quiet, happy life. Nazareth was a place where Jesus could grow. According to Luke, he "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God." (Lk. 2:40) My theory is that at Nazareth he came to know many of the people after whom he modeled, as many writers do, the people of his later parables. Mary and Joseph were not where they wanted to be, but God was with them where they were and led them into a new future.

We are not yet at that last part of the story. We are still in the Advent that is waiting for the new normal. We have here, however, the blessing of known this place where we are, this place where we do not want to be, is a safe place, largely away from the jurisdiction of danger. This is a godly place. Everything is changed around us. Much is changing, but God is still reaching us.

And in the meanwhile, we have the hope of believing God shall lead us forth from here, not back to the same, but to a place that is less confining and a place that is pleasing.