

The Geography of Refuge: Egypt
Matthew 2:13-23
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Poor Egypt: It always gets a bad rap. Sure, Egypt was the land of Pharaoh Ramsees II whose ancestors subjugated the Hebrews to 450 years of slavery. It was Egypt where Moses pleaded before Ramsees on God's behalf: "Let my people go!"

But lost to many is that Egypt was also where Abraham, Father of Israel, found refuge from famine. Lost is that Egypt was where the Old Testament Joseph landed after his brothers sold him into slavery, only to make a life for himself there and later help spare his father Jacob and 11 brothers' and sister's lives from famine as Pharaoh's right hand man. Lost is that Egypt became a place of refuge for Jesus and Mary and Joseph.

Here we are, basking in the afterglow of Christmas Day on this 10th of the 12 Days of Christmas. But "What happens after the glory? After the angels are quiet, after the shepherds go back to their flocks and the wise men return to their homes?"¹ An angel appears in a dream to Mary's Joseph advising him to flee with Mary and baby Jesus to Egypt to avoid King Herod's murderous wrath. This is the same Herod René mentioned last Sunday, who ordered the Slaughter of the Innocents we read in today's text.

Fred Craddock remarks, "It's hard to accept that the Good News has enemies. But it does. To read Matthew, the vultures circling over the

shallow graves of children are hard to miss. You find Joseph bolting up in bed, ‘Mary! Mary! Wrap the child!’ ‘What’s the matter?’ she says. ‘We’ve got to go!’ ‘What do you mean?’ ‘I had this dream,’ Joseph says. ‘They’re coming for the boy. Get ready. We’ve got to go!’ And off they go to Egypt, to hide from his enemies, among his enemies. What else was there to do?

“It’s hard to accept: Rachel crying, refusing to be consoled. ‘They’ve killed my children! They’ve killed my children!’ Why? Because Jesus our Lord is born! It’s hard to accept that good news has such enemies.

“The great revolutions have not been started by revolutionaries, but by people who said, ‘All we want to do is love and worship.’ Watch whom you love! If you love the wrong people, it will get you into trouble.”²

You see, Egypt is also a part of “The Geography of Christmas.” It, of all places, became sanctuary, for the holy family who, because of Herod, now find themselves refugees.

If this seems overstatement consider again the violence Herod perpetrated upon the infants of Bethlehem. “No warrants. No court of appeal. No stay of execution. No legal appeals. No announcement or warning of any kind.”³ Rachel’s children at Bethlehem had no more warning than the Jews during Kristallnacht, “the night of broken glass,” when Nazis slaughtered innocent Jews. Nor did the Cambodian people in what is called “The Second Holocaust” which Cambodian leader Pol Pot

exacted upon his own people in the Killing Fields. Make no mistake: Joseph and Mary and baby Jesus were refugees seeking sanctuary and shelter in Egypt against a similar holocaust in Bethlehem.

Refugees still come in many guises. I will never forget those I met off an airplane at Kansas City International years ago when I helped resettle more than 200 refugees for Don Bosco Community Center. My job was to find furnishings, clothing, and kitchenware for Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Laotian refugees, who often spent years in refugee camps in Southeast Asia.

Early one evening in January 1986 I was invited to accompany one of our Cambodian caseworkers, Mr. Soekert, to the airport to greet a family of 8 off the plane. The temperature was barely 20. We were to meet the Chrang Chrim family who had been in a camp for 1-1/2 years in Thailand.

Among them was their 82-year old grandmother who came off the plane with nothing on her feet except open-toed sandals. A moment later two of her grandchildren appeared with nothing on their feet at all. They were walking barefoot on the icy, cold January pavement! I couldn't believe my eyes. I'd seen poverty before, but not like this. They were just a poor refugee family escaping the Killing Fields, seeking sanctuary in America.

Is this not what God calls us to provide through this church? Does God not call us to be Egypt for those who live in a world full of violent

Bethlehems? Is it not our job to be a refuge for those who are victims of injustice against the jealous, power-hungry Herods of the world?

In answer we first need to consider how we think about God. “Alfred North Whitehead once indicted Christianity at exactly this point: ‘the picture we customarily paint of God looks more like Herod on his distant throne, issuing orders of life and death than it does of Rachel weeping in Bethlehem. Rachel weeps because that is the way God is. The presence of God is not signaled by the monarch’s throne but by a mother’s tears’.”⁴

We also need to remember that Herod will never finally be victorious. Yes, holocausts happen. Innocents die and refugees abound: some 50 million or more today in places like the Sudan, in central Asia, in Palestine, for starters. But the Christmas story of the holy family’s escape reminds us that today’s Herods will not prevail. At the end of the story Herod dies. His death symbolizes the ultimate death of injustice, poverty, and hunger everywhere in God’s new realm.

We also need to ask ourselves the question: “When people come to our church, do they find sanctuary, a place safe for their honest spiritual journey?”⁵ We need to become a sanctuary of hope in a world of despair.

A children’s story suggests what we are to be. When Joseph and Mary and Jesus were on their way to Egypt, as the evening came they were weary, and they sought refuge in a cave. It was very cold, so cold that the

ground was white with hoar frost. A little spider saw the little baby Jesus, and he wished so much that he could do something to keep him warm in the cold night. He decided to do the only thing he could and spin his web across the entrance of the cave, to make, as it were, a curtain there.

Along the path came a detachment of Herod's soldiers, seeking for children to kill to carry out Herod's bloodthirsty order. When they came to the cave they were about to burst in to search it, but their captain noticed the spider's web, covered with the white hoar frost and stretched right across the entrance to the cave. "Look," he said, "at the spider's web there. It is quite unbroken and there cannot possibly be anyone in the cave, for anyone entering would certainly have torn the web."⁶

So the soldiers passed on, and left the holy family in peace, because a little spider had spun his web across the entrance to the cave.

Renowned psychiatrist Karl Menninger once said that "each of us has been put here to dilute the misery in the world and that even if we couldn't make a big contribution we could each do something."⁷

We first must start by adding one more figure to our Nativity scene. More than the holy family, the shepherds, and the Magi we must add the figure of a soldier, Herod's soldier. We must never forget Christmas isn't over until the last soldier drops his sword in peace and no one has to flee for their lives any more.

¹John S. Carpenter, "Sermon Reviews, *Lectionary Homiletics*," December 2001, p. 34.

²Fred Craddock, "The Hard Side of Epiphany," as found in *PreachingToday.com*; Keyword: Refuge

³Dan Nicksich, "Suffering Amid the Joy," *Preaching*, Nov/Dec 1998, p. 46

⁴Patrick J. Willson, *Lectionary Homiletics, op.cit.*, p. 35. The name "Rachel" alludes to Jacob's wife. She stood for all Jewish mothers. The allusion in this text from Matthew 2 is to that "Everywoman" Rachel who weeps as Jewish exiles are carted off to Babylon during the time of the prophet Jeremiah.

⁵Kent D. Moorehead, "The Egyptian Strategy," *Pulpit Digest*, J/F 1997, p. 65.

⁶William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1, The Daily Study Bible Series*, Phila: Westminster Press, 1976, p. 35

⁷Nicksich, *Ibid.*, p. 47.