

The Refugee
Based on Matthew 2:13-23
December 30, 2007
Aspen Community UMC

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Last week we were observers hearing the story
of Mary and Joseph and the baby in the manger.
And now, some time has passed – maybe up to a year.

The story of the manger gives way
to the realities of life on this earth for many children, and mothers and fathers -
but especially children -
when monarchs, presidents or military juntas
oppress or destroy communities
causing people to flee their homes and families and friends
to face uncertain futures wherever they can find asylum.
Genocide was the kind of oppression Herod had in mind.

There is little way we can know the historical facts of this account.

This was written long before we considered
historical accuracy in contrast to stories of enduring truths that
are passed on to others through narrative – legend.

Karen Armstrong, the author of *The Battle for God* describes two kinds of knowledge -
mythos and *logos*.

Mythos is narrative that incorporates timeless truths.
Logos is the more pragmatic kind of knowledge, that is practical,
and searches for historical or scientific accuracy.

Scholars tell us that Matthew was written for the Jews.
Matthew was trying to give parallels between the birth of Jesus,
his early life, and that of Moses –
an infant hidden for his safety – another refugee.
He finds asylum in the hands of a Pharaoh's daughter
where he can be safe in growing up – where he finds home.

Now, the young Jesus and his parents become refugees,
and the angel told them where to find asylum.
Refugees, nonetheless, fleeing the threatened genocide of boy children under the age of two.

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Historians tell us that there was a large Jewish population living in Egypt - since the time of the Babylonian captivity five to six hundred years before.

If this is correct, Joseph and Mary and Jesus would likely have found home in a friendly and hospitable place - but not before they experienced the terror of the danger their child faced.

Our friends Uli and Sandy Kappas who visited us a few weeks ago brought us a gift. It is a stone about 7 inches square.

It rests on a small easel frame beside our fireplace.

Carved on the stone are the words, "Home is where your story begins."

Think about your own story. It has to begin where you first learned about the world, about other people. Were they trustable or not?

Were you safe, or did you have to worry about having to run to somewhere safer?

The reading for this Sunday is one that calls on us, implores us, I believe, to consider what its like to be a refugee, to seek asylum, just to live your life.

The subject is far too broad even to give much of an overview.

Did you know that an estimated 80% of refugees in all countries are women and children?¹

Children and youth constitute about 50% of refugees worldwide.

They miss out on education, and they become easy prey for abuse of all kinds, and recruitment into terrorist's organizations.

A refugee (according to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees) "is a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, unwilling to avail him/herself of the protection of that country."

The concept was expanded later to include persons who had fled war or other violence and yet remained in their home country.

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Refugee was defined as a legal group in response to the large numbers of people fleeing Eastern Europe following World War II.

The organization coordinating refugee protection is the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

This office counted 28.4 million refugees worldwide at the beginning of 2005.

This did not include Palestinian refugees, several million more.

These were people displaced by the 1948 creation of the state of Israel - a measure in part to create a country for Jews displaced because of the Nazis.

This is to get us thinking, how displacement, has a kind of domino effect, and refugees upon refugees create environments of dislocation and unrest.

I don't know about you, but what I see is that displaced persons, growing numbers of refugees, are being created in places of extended civil war, and as of the past five to ten years, places around the world where radical Islamic factions have waged war on anyone not in agreement with them.

I just want to point out two places in particular.

There are about 4.3 million Palestinian refugees under the authority of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

Even the descendents of the original refugees are given refugee status.

And we can see why – for there has been no place to go – and years have passed and people have lived in this never-never land.

Is it surprising that the Palestinian territory has become a breeding ground for terrorist activity?

Is it any wonder that terrorist organizations have claimed victory in democratic elections?

What kind of home? For home is where your story begins.

What about Afghanistan?

Has anyone here seen the movie, *Charlie Wilson's War*?

Charlie Wilson's War is a movie with Tom Hanks based on a former Congressman from east Texas. It is a true story about Wilson who from his place on the Defense Appropriations Committee brought the military power that enabled Afghanistan to overcome the Soviet invasion that began in 1979.

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Here is why I call it to your attention.

Wilson asked his committee to support education and development for this
war-torn area and people,
but after all the hundred's of millions of dollars for winning the war,
Congress would not spend anything for education and community development on the back end.

See the movie – see what you think.

But, as I see it, this left a vacuum – filled by - among other things -
the son of a wealthy Saudi contractor who financed schools and a little infrastructure
and you know his name – Osama Bin Laden.

Whether that would have made the difference or not, we don't know.

What we do know now is this.

War creates strange bedfellows, and in the Cold War, anyone willing to fight Communism
seemed a friend to those who wanted to make the world safe for democracy.

Afghanistan remained unstable and became a breeding ground
for Muslim extremists including Osama Bin Laden.

By 2005, Afghanistan was one of about five major countries from which people sought asylum.

In 2007, two million Afghan refugees were still living in Pakistan alone.

And we know what happened this week with the assassination of the former primer minister of Pakistan.

We could talk about Sudan, and Darfur, the civil wars that have ravaged
that country for some 20 years. Sudan has internally displaced persons,
persons who cannot leave, have lost home and livelihood,
and are subjected to abuse and starvation – born into abuse and starvation.

We see and hear about these persons often from celebrities who
work with the United Nations to call attention to the plight of these refugees
who have so little hope for life, health, and livelihood.

Luciano Pavarotti may have done the most work in raising awareness and funds to fight poverty there.

Now Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt are working to
raise awareness in ways governments can't seem to do.

Cameras will follow them and we can see some things we might not otherwise see.

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This is not a lecture about the number of displaced persons in the world,
whether caused by war, economics, or the environment.

This is a message about how it continues to happen,
and it appears to be a precursor to the growth and festering of the kind of violence
and terrorism about which we are becoming more and more aware.

Can we at this church do anything to make a difference?
Lest we just nod our heads in agreement that it happens,
and quickly try to forget it because it is overwhelming.

I believe we can educate ourselves,
and I believe we can discover ways to reach out,
for example, to moderate Muslim individuals and communities,
who find themselves as much at a loss as we are, and are in mortal fear of speaking up.

What if we worked on an educational opportunity right here in
this church, this community?
What about a spiritually based seminar next summer with noted authorities and ourselves
to dialogue on ways of supporting, empowering and enabling moderate Muslims?

Let me know what you think.

There has been talk about a trip to Kenya next summer.
Kenya has received thousands of refugees from Sudan and Darfur.
What can the people of Kenya teach us?
If we go, we would be working for a week in one of the communities,
but we will have opportunities to spend time
with others whose lives and experience will broaden our views of the world.

I was in conversation with some young people the other day,
and they called my attention to something I had not thought about much.
That as much as Aspen is an international destination,
and a place where much learning and conversation goes on about the wider world,
there is also a sense of isolation.

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Is that an attitude that has some accuracy? I don't know yet.
But I do know that this is a place full of very capable people -
and I want to call us into a time of outreach
for mission, for learning, and for blessing.
Because reaching beyond ourselves (which is what mission is)
and learning – will always lead to blessing.

Today's reading from Matthew is important because it tells us that
deep in the heart of the divine – is the longing for home -
and a call to help others find home whenever we can.
Our young family (Joseph, Mary, and Jesus) reaches safe harbor in a community where they were received,
We are called to facilitate that for others.

Perhaps we have never been refugees ourselves,
but I would guess that if we looked back in our families, not too many generations,
many of us would find the refugee, displaced from home and country
who found a new home here.
Can we ever know how fortunate they were?

Our reading helps me understand why we as faithful people
are asked to give hospitality to the stranger – to care about that.
How to do that in the most effective way is really our task.
It takes more than governments.
It takes non-governmental organizations too.
Many are out there to work with.
And it takes individuals willing just to be a part of a much bigger effort.

I invite your ideas and your conversation as we move into this New Year.
Home is where your story begins. It is where our story begins.
What kind of stories are out there these days?
And, where are the stories that will contribute to peace?

¹ This information about refugees and the United Nations is from Wikipedia.com.