

Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale
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A Refugee God
Matthew 2:13-23

I am preaching about refugees this morning.

Perhaps you, like me, are so frustrated by the government shut down over the border wall that you want to scream.

Perhaps you, like me, have a good friend who is working without pay despite her own bills and responsibilities.

Perhaps you would like to come to church and not think about the political mess that bombards us each day.

I'm not preaching about that this morning. I'm preaching about refugees.

And yes, refugees have become a political hot button in this country. And yes, preaching about refugees is political because politics are simply how we organize our society.

But this morning I'm preaching about refugees because refugees are the text of our liturgical year. We are reading the story of refugees from the Bible this morning. And we have the opportunity to hear the stories of refugees in our community after worship today, too.

So I'm preaching about refugees because the story of refugees is our faith story, our biblical story. So, let us begin.

Once upon a time there was a older man and a teenage woman who had an extraordinary experience. She got pregnant, he nearly divorced her, angels visited and she had her baby while they were on the road in some ramshackle outbuilding. And then shepherds came and there was a star. And then, just as they are settling in, two years later, kings showed up to see this special child and brought them wildly amazing gifts.

And here they had this incredible responsibility, as if raising any baby isn't responsibility enough, to raise the son of God! Here they are. This family chosen out of all the possible families in the universe. And the man has a dream that says, "Get up and get out. Now!" And this man, having listened to God before in an important dream, gets up and gets them out, fleeing to Egypt just in time as the King of the day orders the military to massacre all the children two and under. This is called the Massacre of the Innocents in our church calendar.

The United Nations High Commission on Refugees defines a refugee as a person who has been forced to leave their country due to persecution, violence or a national disaster. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.

Joseph, Mary and Jesus were refugees. They were forced to leave their country due to violence. They had a well founded fear that Herod would kill them. They crossed the border to Egypt seeking safety. We don't know what happened but the Holy Family was able to stay as refugees for many years only coming back when a new ruler came to power in Judah.

Jesus' early life is the story of a refugee. Leaving everything and fleeing for safety across a border to an unknown land with the hope for safety. After all the word refugee has the word refuge built right into it. Joseph, Mary and Jesus sought refuge. A place to be safe.

In 2017, there were 25.4 million refugees in the world, the highest number ever recorded. This does not include another 40 million internally displaced people--folks who have fled their homes but are still within their own country, have not crossed a national border--and an additional 3.1 million asylum seekers, those who are not yet considered refugees because their case for asylum has not yet been heard.

Being a refugee is a last resort. To run for one's life and leave behind all that is known for the crashing uncertainty of life in another place,

What was life like for Joseph and Mary and Jesus as refugees? How were they received in Egypt? How did they support themselves? Could they work? Who welcomed them, helped them, befriended them? We know the magi gave them gold and I imagine that gold was probably pretty helpful, enabling them to make this journey and buy some safety.

How did the experience of being a refugee impact Jesus' life, how he understood himself and others, his radical approach to welcoming all people, especially those on the margins who were different?

Now this is not the first time in our faith story that we read of being a refugee in Egypt. Back in Genesis after Joseph has been sold into slavery by his brothers and rises in Pharaoh's court, Joseph's family comes to Egypt seeking food, fleeing famine, a natural disaster. And they end up settling in Egypt as refugees, eventually becoming the Israelites who end up oppressed under a very different Pharaoh later.

Our scripture, particularly in Exodus, tells us over and over, "do not mistreat or abuse the sojourners/foreigners who live among you. Remember that you were sojourners/foreigners in Egypt."

Being refugees is a big part of our faith story, our lineage, our history. Our ancestors in faith have been refugees, foreigners, exiles, displaced over and over and over again across our history. Abraham, Jacob, Leah, Rachel, Lot, Noah, Esther, Ruth, Naomi, Moses, Miriam, Joshua, Jeremiah...and more.

In our time, in recent years, we have watched this overwhelming refugee situation play out across the world. We've seen European nations wrestle with welcoming refugees, particularly from Syria, or putting up barriers. We've seen international leaders win or lose elections based on decisions to welcome or exclude. As our world convulses with such large numbers of people fleeing in fear, we convulse as well as we have asylum seekers and refugees on our own border and have to decide what to do.

Rev. Mark Koenig, a Presbyterian pastor and Director of Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations says that if we wish to talk about refugees, we have to talk about fear. Our fear.

"Fear always creeps into conversations about refugees and immigrants—a fear of the other—of people from whom we differ."

He writes, "Some pastors may preach that we should be afraid. We should hunker and hide in fear. And we should allow fear to guide us in our behavior and relationships with refugees. I will not do that.

“Surrendering to fear in relation to our brothers and sisters who flee for their lives flies in the face of everything I believe as a follower of Jesus. It goes against everything I believe as a citizen of this country.

“Some pastors may preach today that we have nothing to fear. After all, fear not is what Jesus told his disciples on several occasions. Sermons will proclaim that that God is completely in control, life is working out according to God’s plan, God will protect us, and we have no reason for fear. I will not do that.

“The world is a broken and fearful place. I know that and you know that. Megan McCardle observes, “There’s no perfect way to screen out Syrian terrorists from Syrian refugees [despite our 2 year vetting process in the US]. It may be that someone we let in will, eventually, do something horrible. In fact, that’s a risk with any immigrant we let in, or for that matter, any baby we allow to be born.” (Rev. Mark Koenig)

We live in a broken and fearful world. And so it is...natural that we fear.

“Joseph, Mary, and Jesus all become refugees packing up their things in the night, making haste, throwing their things together and running from the country. Fleeing from political violence like so many refugees have done before and so many refugees do today. They cross borders without travel documents, they seek safety, they seek sanctuary.

“They arrive in Egypt, the strange land. Although they are strangers, someone must have taken them in. Someone must have welcomed them and helped them. Don't you wish we knew the name of the person who first welcomed Joseph and Mary and Jesus?

“I wonder if when Joseph, who was a carpenter, when he started looking for work in his trade, I wonder if the other carpenters said things like, "Here comes that foreigner. He's going to take away a job from one of our own Egyptians." "Here's Mary and that baby, I wonder if this woman and child are going to burden our welfare system. That family, they just do things differently.” (Christy Lipscomb, Christian Reformed Church, Do Justice)

We fear, “But, we fear as those who follow the Jesus... We fear. But we refuse to allow fear to rule our actions and decisions. And that makes all the difference.

“Jesus teaches us that the way we individually and collectively treat the least of our sisters and brothers is the way we treat him. That would seem particularly appropriate in relation to our brothers and sisters who are refugees—in the world’s refugees we encounter the Refugee Jesus.” (Koenig)

In my literacy work refugees come to our program and recently a family from the Democratic Republic of Congo enrolled. We don’t know much about their background. In fact it is even hidden from those who are helping them resettle. What we know is that things were so terrible that the whole family had to evacuate, elderly parents, adult and teenage children, and there was a long wait in a refugee camp in Uganda.

Refugee resettlement to the U.S. is traditionally offered to the most vulnerable refugee cases including women and children at risk, women heads of households, the elderly, survivors of violence and torture and those with acute medical needs.

There are refugees here in Lexington, too. Today we will learn more about their stories, their needs and the programs of LexRAP that serve this population here in town. It is an opportunity for us to think about how we, Pilgrim Church, might serve this population with our time, our efforts, our hands held out in friendship and fellowship.

What might it mean to follow and serve a refugee Jesus in this time and place? What might it mean for this work to become a part of our mission here at Pilgrim as we discern how we as a faith community are going to serve our neighbors?

I was a stranger and you welcomed me. When Lord Jesus, when did we welcome you? When you did it for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it for me. Amen.