

***The Refugee Option***  
**Matthew 2:13-22**  
**Sermon by Dan Schrock**  
**January 3, 2016**

*<sup>13</sup>Now after they [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.”<sup>14</sup>Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt,<sup>15</sup>and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”*

*<sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: <sup>18</sup>“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.”*

*<sup>19</sup>When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, <sup>20</sup>“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.”<sup>21</sup>Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. <sup>22</sup>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. (NRSV)*

Most of us grew up with nativity scenes in our homes. At the center of the scene is a cute baby Jesus, happily lying in a manger. Around him are a proud Mary and Joseph, along with three or four shepherds and maybe some chorusing angels flapping around on the roof of the shed. Of course any manger scene worth its salt will also have a collection of sheep and at least one cow. It’s all very peaceful, charming, bucolic.

And in virtually every manger set I’ve ever seen are the Magi, or as we used to call them, the wise men. Three of them, there are always three of them, each holding a gift in his hands, even though the story doesn’t say there were three Magi. There had to be at least two because the Greek word for Magi is plural, but it could have been three or five or seven. Matthew doesn’t specify the number.

But the main problem with our household nativity scenes is that the Magi were never there, at least not at the same time as the shepherds. According to the text, the Magi didn’t show up until two years after the birth of Jesus (v. 16). By this point Jesus is no longer an infant, but a rambunctious toddler just learning to talk. He’s about the age of our own Abram Derstine, Micah Weiland, and Luke Yoder. This story happens two years after Christmas.

Another problem with our nativity scenes is that immediately after the Magi left, things got horribly violent. Whatever peace Mary and Joseph felt during the first two years of Jesus' life was snatched away overnight. Overnight, God's grand project to save the world through Jesus almost sputtered. The problem was violence—violence that threatened to snuff out the life of Jesus before it had hardly even begun.

The heart of the problem was King Herod the Great. You surely remember the Bible's vision for what government rulers are supposed to do, don't you? This afternoon, pick up a Bible and re-read Psalm 72, and you'll see it clearly laid out on the page. A ruler's job is to create shalom for everyone who lives in the land. Not just for some people who live in the land, but for everyone who lives in the land. Shalom is a lofty, noble, and all-encompassing idea. Shalom is about freedom from violence. Shalom is about good jobs, fair wages, healthcare, and adequate retirement for everyone. It's about laws that protect the vulnerable from the powerful. Shalom pursues economic growth in a way that honors creation. Shalom treasures the dignity of people from every race and language.

No one ever accused King Herod of caring about shalom. I don't know if King Herod ever read Psalm 72, but even if he had, he clearly ignored it, because his one goal in life was to enhance his own personal power and prestige. He governed for himself, not for others. Governing for the poor was not his goal. Shalom was not his goal. Whenever Herod had a political problem, his favorite solution was to start killing people. And so hearing from the Magi that a new king had been born in his realm, Herod turned to his favorite solution and sent soldiers to do the dirty work of stabbing and slicing everybody in Bethlehem who was up to two years old.

Look at this from God's point of view. If Herod had been successful in killing the toddler he wanted to kill, it would have abruptly ended God's project in Jesus. Over the centuries God had spent enormous effort to save us human beings from our own stubborn silliness. God gave laws; God sent prophets; but nothing God did created the kind of free and faithful people that God wanted. Finally God inaugurated a grand plan to do what previous plans had failed to do. Call it the Jesus Project. In the Jesus Project God's own self would enter the world as a human being to do and say and show what no

other human being had ever done or said or shown. Do you think God was going to let some two-bit terrorist like Herod ruin the Jesus Project?

Absolutely not. But here's the thing: God doesn't operate like the Herods of the world. God does not resort to violence like the Herods then or now do. Could God have killed Herod then and there? Of course. As Jesus will later tell his followers in Gethsemane, do you not know that God could send more than twelve legions of angels—72,000 strong—to defend me (Matt 26:53)? Oh yes, God could have resorted to violence against Herod, but God did not.

Yet God still needed to preserve the Jesus Project. God still needed to save Jesus so that Jesus could save others. How could God do that? Given that God rejects violence, what other strategy could God employ to save and protect this vulnerable toddler?

What God decided to do was to deploy the refugee option. Rather than fighting Herod on Herod's own violent terms, God chose to turn Jesus, Mary, and Joseph into refugees. In a dream, God warned Joseph of Herod's murderous intentions and told them to skedaddle down the road for Egypt. Notice: God sometimes nudges people to become refugees in order to save them from violence. Did you catch that? Sometimes God saves people from violence by making them refugees.

There are a lot of refugees in the world today. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees reports that there are now 60 million refugees or internally displaced people in the world. That's the highest number since World War II.<sup>1</sup> Refugees are people who flee their home country and go to other country, like the huge numbers of people who've recently fled Syria. Internally displaced people are folks who flee from one part of their country to another part of the country, as has been happening for a long time in Colombia. But both groups of people have the same thing in common: they are fleeing violence.

We normally think of refugees as a problem, and in truth, it's no fun being a refugee, living in a refugee camp, or trying to find a new place to emigrate to. It's an

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<sup>1</sup> David A. Graham, "Violence Has Forced 60 Million People from Their Homes," *The Atlantic*, June 17, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/06/refugees-global-peace-index/396122/>, accessed December 4, 2015.

enormous task to resettle refugees and help them find a new life in a new land. But what if we look at refugees through a slightly different lens? What if we understood that the refugee option is one of God's tools for saving people from the stupid violence perpetrated by the Herods of the world?

Think about how often God has deployed the refugee option. Abraham and Sarah left their original home in Ur to seek a new land somewhere to the southwest. Jacob fled the violence of his brother and sought safety in Haran. The sons of Jacob fled the famine in their land for the well-stocked granaries of Egypt. Many years later, Moses fled Egypt to become a refugee in the wilderness of Midian. The entire Hebrew people fled the oppression and violence of Egypt and entered the desert, where they wandered as refugees for forty years. Naomi and her family fled Israel to live as refugees in Moab, and later Ruth fled Moab to become a refugee in Israel. David fled Saul and for a while became a refugee living among the Philistines. Elijah fled Israel's queen and king, Jezebel and Ahab, and went south to Judah for safety. At the end of this life, Jeremiah became a refugee in Babylon, as did thousands of other Jews.

My friends, Judeo-Christian faith was born and nurtured in refugee camps! God's own heart has enormous compassion for refugees. Sometimes God tells people to leave their homeland. Sometimes God urges people to flee violence. Sometimes God uses the refugee option to work around governments that thwart the shalom those same governments are supposed to be fostering.

Thanks be to God for everyone who helps refugees. Thanks for Jethro, who helped Moses. Thanks for that widow in Zarephath who sheltered Elijah. Thanks for Boaz, who helped and married Ruth. Thanks for the nameless Egyptians who welcomed Jesus, Mary, and Joseph when they safely arrived in Egypt.

And thanks for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Thanks for organizations like Catholic Charities, Church World Service, Lutheran Social Services, World Vision, and our own Mennonite Central Committee that aid and resettle refugees. Thanks for towns and cities that welcome refugees of any faith, whether Muslim or Jew, Christian or Buddhist or Sikh.

Let us magnify the Lord and exult in God our Savior,  
who disperses the haughty in the scheming of their minds,  
who unseats tyrants from their thrones  
and lifts high the lowly.

Praise be to the God who fills the hungry with good things  
and sends the rich ones away empty.

Praise to the God of shalom!