

Flight to Egypt

In the lectionary we have traveled in time, yet in North America it was only two weeks ago we gathered for Christmas Day. From the day of Jesus' birth to the visit of the Magi is a matter of some speculation. Some say it was months, other's say years. We know it was less than two years for one very insidious reason, which we'll get to in a moment.

When last we gathered with the Holy Family they were nestled down in a barn, having given birth in the lowliest of circumstances. Mary, alone, save for Joseph is surrounded with cattle, sheep and who knows what else. There were shepherds who came to visit after an angel told them of a miraculous birth.

And yet despite what greeting card companies, some hymns and Sunday school colouring pages would have you believe, the Wise Ones did not appear on the night our Saviour was born. The second chapter of Matthew tells of the arrival of the Wise Ones. We are never told in scripture how many actually arrive. In the Eastern Orthodox Church the number is believed to be twelve, yet most Western Christian denominations number them at three, based on the number of gifts presented.

In fact, when they arrived at Herod's temple, they asked "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." (Matthew 2.2, NRSV) We are told Herod was afraid "and all Jerusalem with him" (Matthew 2.3, NRSV) as Herod was a paranoid and powerful man. He was the self-appointed king of the Jews and hearing of an infant enraged him. There was no way he would allow an infant to upstage him.

Herod called for his advisors, the chief priests and scribes to confirm what he had heard from the Wise Ones, and he was told that, indeed, the King of the Jews would be born in Bethlehem in Judea. Herod had to act quickly.

He called the Wise Ones to meet him in secret, to ask exactly when they saw the star. He then bade them go forth to Bethlehem to find this infant and to come back to him with an exact location in order that he may go and give his respectful regards to this holy infant.

And so the Wise Ones departed from Herod and made their way to Bethlehem. Upon greeting the young parents with their infant son, they opened their treasure chests and presented them with gold, frankincense and myrrh.

While we're at it, the gifts are rather strange...even for those days. These days new parents would be gifted with a diaper service, cartons of formula, ergonomic bottles, nipple covers, baby-proofing devices, words of advice and at least one invitation to babysit when the parents were ready for date-night.

Back in the time of Jesus, his parents were gifted by very wealthy royalty. They were presented with gold, frankincense and myrrh. There's really not much call these days for frankincense and myrrh. I don't think you could pop to Save-One or even Costco and purchase gold, frankincense and myrrh. Now, you MAY be able to purchase frankincense as an essential oil...

A twenty-first century equivalent to these things would be money - perhaps in the form of a cheque or more likely, an e-transfer or paypal gift. For frankincense and myrrh the closest modern equivalent would be a jar of embalming fluid. You see frankincense and myrrh were both used to prepare a body for burial and to help mask the odour of decay. Myrrh was used for anointing royalty and to help with embalming in the time of Jesus. Frankincense was used for anointing of royalty and was often burned in temples. Gifting the infant Jesus with this signified that the Wise Ones saw him as King.

In those days, angels visited regularly, both in person and through dreams. Angels feature heavily in the Nativity Story wherein an angel visits Elizabeth. And Mary. And Joseph. And Shepherds. And Wise Ones.

We are told that after the Wise Ones had visited Jesus and his family, they were warned not to return to Herod and instead, returned home to their own country by another road. We aren't told how long the Magi took to get to Herod, or how long it took them to get to Bethlehem to see the infant Jesus, or how long it took them to go home by another road.

Joseph is warned by an angel in a dream "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." (Matthew 2.13, NRSV) And so, by cover of night, Joseph takes Mary and Jesus and makes the trek from Bethlehem to Egypt which would have taken, likely one to two weeks, depending on how quickly they were able to travel. From the point of departure through their arrival in Egypt, the Holy family were refugees.

A refugee is defined as, "A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group." (www.america magazine.org)

It is believed that the time between arriving in Egypt and the return to Nazareth is approximately three years. They did, indeed, remain in Egypt until Joseph was again, told in a dream, that Herod had died and it was safe for them to return to Judea.

Now, it would be tempting to leave the story here, where our heroes have fled for their life, in the hopes of averting the death of their infant son. What happens next is nothing short of horrifying, yet it is a story that is seldom told. It is often referred to as the Massacre of the Innocents.

In Matthew's Gospel we are told:

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. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

'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.'

(Matthew 2.16-18, NRSV)

Could you imagine? You have given birth to a baby boy, whom you are told is the Saviour of humanity - the Messiah - Emmanuel - God-with-Us. And then your partner is warned in a dream that you cannot stay where you have been for the past year or so because if you do, your child will be killed. And so you run, under cover of night to protect your child - as you are prepared to give your own life in order to save him.

Remember, this is Mary we are talking about. The one who responded with a battle cry when she was told she would give birth to a miracle baby, who would one day, save the world. This is the same Mary who was determined that the worldly order would be turned on its head. The rich would be sent away empty and the hungry and meek would be given their fill.

But first she has to save her son's life; becoming a refugee in a strange land with a strange language. She has to hide her family's identities as they do not know how far Herod's reach would be. Keep in mind that there would not be partner agencies to Primate's World Relief and Development, or Mission and Service, or the Red Cross in those days.

There would not be coordinated efforts to record how many refugees were fleeing into Egypt. It is quite likely that once word got out that Herod intended to slaughter all male babies under the age of two, that there would be many more families fleeing for their lives.

There is an apocryphal story that in the midst of the slaughter, Herod's own biological son was killed. The event is alluded to by Macrobius, a pagan writing in the early 5th century: "On hearing that the son of Herod, king of the Jews, had been slain when Herod ordered that all boys in Syria under the age of two be killed, [Augustus] said, 'It's better to be Herod's pig than his son.'"

Keep in mind that Herod would have been raised Jewish, yet culturally he was Roman. Keeping a Jewish diet would mean that he would eschew pork, thus a pig was safe, yet not his own son.

Whether the Massacre of the Holy Innocents is true remains a subject of speculation. On one hand, there is no historical evidence that such a massacre of these proportions took place. It is recorded only in Matthew's Gospel. It does not appear in Mark's, Luke's or John's Gospel accounts.

For some perspective, the Greek account of the massacre numbered the dead at 14,000, while the Syrian account increases that number to 64,000. Given the population of Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth it is believed that as many as 20 male infants were killed with as many as a dozen in outlying areas.

In all honesty, whether it was six or 60,000 children killed, even one is too many, even six is horrific. And as with many lessons in our holy stories, whether it actually happened does not take away from the irrefutable evidence that Herod was a dangerous, paranoid and powerful man.

Approximately three years after Joseph was warned in a dream to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt he was told it was safe to return to Judea. He packed up his family and returned. However, realizing that Herod's son Archelaus was now ruling Israel, Joseph felt uneasy with the decision to return. He was further warned in a dream not to return to Israel, and so he took his family to the district of Galilee, to a town known as Nazareth, which was roughly 170 kms or roughly 106 miles. This would have taken the Holy family, walking at 2 miles per hour, and roughly six hours a day, close to ten days to walk to Nazareth from Egypt.

The Bible says very little about Jesus, Mary and Joseph as refugees and yet it would have been a reality. How would they have survived in that time? Joseph was a skilled carpenter and likely was easily able to find work. Did they have to change their names or pretend they hadn't come to Egypt from Israel?

Something to remember is there are currently 84 million refugees in the world. This number does not include refugees and displaced persons from Ukraine. An estimate is at least 4.8 million refugees have fled Ukraine with likely another 7.1 million displaced within the country.

How many of us come from refugee countries?

How many of us have parents who came to Canada as refugees?

How many of us have grandparents who came to Canada as refugees?

With numbers like 84 million worldwide it can all seem overwhelming and we may feel helpless. But fear not - there are many agencies who provide support globally for refugees. Here are four agencies and there will be links provided in today's email.

International Rescue Committee or IRC
Canadian Council for Refugees
Mission & Service from the United Church of Canada
Primate's World Relief & Development Fund from
the Anglican Church of Canada

Jesus was a refugee. The world was a dangerous and frightening place, especially to be away from home. Yet for many of his formative years he was away from home. He was led by Mary who was prepared to lift up the meek and lowly, to send the rich away empty and fill the meek and lowly with good things.

I do not know for certain, yet I suspect much of Jesus' desire to turn the world upside down and push against the status quo, the wealthy and the powerful came from his mother and from the stories she shared with him, and those he remembered experiencing.

Power and authority, at least earthly power and authority did not impress Jesus. He spoke for the voiceless, visited the sick and incarcerated. He shared his table with sex workers, addicts and even tax collectors!

Jesus saw the humanity in every living person and we must do the same.

When we gather at this holy table, let us remember the words of institution -

This is my body, broken in love for you.

This is the cup of salvation, given in love for you.

Remember that when you take these simple things to yourself, you are changed forever – and for the better.

Let the Church say, "Amen"

The Reverend Canon Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent
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Sermon for Epiphany, 8 January 2023
Matthew 2.1-18