

ANYWHERE BUT HERE, ANYTHING BUT THIS

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Matthew 2:13-23

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Service for the Lord's Day

Sinnika was four years old when the war between Finland and the Soviet Union broke out. During the Second World War, over 70,000 children were evacuated from war-torn Finland. She was only 8 years-old when she was sent to Sweden in 1944, from Helsinki, Finland, and was separated from parents and grandparents. She left her home country after repeated years of bombings and evacuations, leaving everything she knew: her parents, her country, and her language. She writes this:

“At the time I was eager to leave Finland for peaceful Sweden. To me Sweden seemed like a fairyland, but of course, I did not understand what the evacuation would mean. The reality was very different; during my 11 months in Sweden I lived in three different foster homes. As a child this was confusing and I blamed myself. I felt that it was my fault, and that I wasn't good enough. I remember crying myself to sleep every night for months on end. I talked to God, since I had no one else to talk to. I would beg God to take me back home to Finland. But at the time, there was no way for me to return to my mother.”¹

Our Scripture reading today tells us the story of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus in danger, and Herod's slaughter of the children of Bethlehem. It's an abrupt change from the Christmas scenes we just witnessed—scenes of praise and adoration, goodness and light, where we imagine cattle lowing and the little boy Jesus asleep on the hay. Even the majestic, mysterious entrance of the magi, kneeling by his side. Everyone wanting to worship, honor, adore. The Christmas story has become a pleasant, tried and true story. Pastoral. The stuff of lullabies.

So the entrance of King Herod is jarring. We didn't read the entirety of the story this morning, but maybe you remember how this all begins—Herod becomes suspicious of the wise men's quest to find this baby who has been born King of the Jews, and he uses them to try to find the child himself. He claims he wants to pay him homage, but his intentions are more sinister. In fact, he wants to destroy the child. Because Herod can't take the idea that there might be a usurper out there. And so he defends his throne the only way a tyrant with a fragile ego knows how. With violence.

Herod had never been afraid to kill to protect his throne. History tells us that during the course of his life he had killed: his brother-in-law, his mother-in-law, then his favorite wife. In his final years, he killed his three eldest sons, fearing they wanted to take over his throne. He killed dozens of people when he learned of conspiracy attempts against him (sometimes real and sometimes imagined.)²

But tyranny didn't begin with Herod, and it didn't end with him, either. There are Herods in our world today. And, of course, a tyrant can't act alone. He's only effective if there are those who will lend him at least tacit support. And we can find evidence of that in Matthew's Gospel, too. There are those who may have turned a blind eye to Herod's violent ways. If we look back to verse 3 of chapter 2, we learn that Herod wasn't the only one who was worried about his throne being overturned. “All Jerusalem with him” was afraid when they heard about the baby who was born King of the Jews. Isn't that always the way it is? Those who are comfortable with the tyrants, who are protected by them, can

¹ [http://stories.unhcr.org/sinikka-stymnes-story-sweden-p2326.html...edited for public reading](http://stories.unhcr.org/sinikka-stymnes-story-sweden-p2326.html...)

² R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew: The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 2007, 84-85.

turn a blind eye to the havoc they cause elsewhere. They're willing to put up with anything. Anything but the very King who was promised to them. Anything but that.

Mohammad tells this story about fleeing Aleppo: "For more than two years my wife, our four children and I survived the Syrian civil war in Aleppo until one evening militia tanks rolled into our Palestinian Refugee Camp and snipers took positions on the rooftops. Our family was forced to flee at once. The camp was wiped off the face of the Earth. We lost sixty men and women to the snipers. Our home was destroyed and my electrical appliance shop burned down. We left for Turkey taking refuge there for several months. Sadly, I could only find menial work illegally and I could not support the six of us. So in October, we decided to move again, this time to Bulgaria. We paid 500 USD each to get across the border starting by car until we reached a forest. The smuggler who was driving us ordered us to get out and only showed us the way through the trees with his hand. We walked for nine hours, reaching the first Bulgarian village across the border on foot.

A family there took us in, while we waited for the police. They gave us coffee and tea, and fed the children. My first memory of Bulgaria is the kindness of this family. However, just a few hours later we would be forced to sleep on the floor in an overcrowded gymnasium at the police precinct. We have just received our refugee papers. I am preparing for the uncertainty of the future, but I am grateful that my family is together and safe. I can get a new shop or a new house, but I would be lost without my family.³

Joseph receives a message in dream that he is to take his family and flee to Egypt because Herod wants to destroy Jesus. When the Holy Family has to flee to Egypt, they are fleeing to the one place they can't possibly want to go. Back to Egypt. Back to the place of enslavement of their ancestors. They'd probably rather go anywhere than there. But to survive, they do what they have to do. The idea of returning to Egypt, the place of slavery of the Hebrew people, was not what Joseph and Mary could have wanted or dreamed for themselves or their young family—to be refugees to such a place.

But the Gospel of Matthew makes it clear that God is moving the Holy Family along. Angels speak to Joseph directly to guide the family's travels. There is a sense of providence, that God is protecting them on their journey. Traveling by night indicates the urgency of the situation. It is a secret and not an easy or safe choice to travel under the cover of darkness. But their lives are in danger, and so they are willing to do anything they need to do.

Some of you know about this. Doing what you have to do to survive. Those of you who have been through chemotherapy or watched a loved one suffer through chemotherapy or some other horrible medical procedure in order to survive know something about that. No one would choose to go through these things. No one in their right mind would choose it. Anything but that. But you do what you have to do in order to survive. Or the tough decisions you have had to make when someone you love is battling addiction. Or mental illness.

And the worst of all is, sometimes you go through hard things, and it still doesn't work out. You watch your loved one go through chemo, and it doesn't work. Or there isn't any treatment for the condition that you have. Or you struggle through depression with someone but you just can't save them. Just like those Bethlehem babies. The ones that don't survive, through no fault of their own. The ones that Herod pours out his wrath upon, just in case he can get to Jesus that way.

Ahmed survived the disaster, but he can't find a reason for his life any more. The 67 year old man recalls the horrible day with a broken heart. He had organized the itinerary of his family's flight well in advance from Syria. 'Agents' helped them to reach Libya, and from there, Tunisian smugglers

³ <http://stories.unhcr.org/mohamads-story-bulgaria-p2841.html>...edited for public reading

should have transported them to Malta. But they got into the hands of a gang of Somalis, Libyans and Tunisians instead. They were kept locked up in a stable on a farm until the departure, that is until the smugglers managed to collect the number of refugees they wanted. Nobody was allowed to leave the building even for a minute. Days were passing and the price of the journey settled in advance kept rising. The women who were unable to cover the ever increasing amount were assaulted by their keepers, the men tied up and tortured.

In the end, Ahmed and the members of his family paid USD 3,000 per person in order to get on board. As they entered the boat, suddenly some Libyan militiamen showed up and held guns to their heads. They demanded more money. As it turned out, the militiamen had noticed that there were more than 200 passengers on board which was more than double than the number the smugglers had agreed upon with them. The refugees emptied their pockets and put together several thousands of dollars. But it did not help. All of a sudden, a ship emerged behind them with the militiamen on board and followed their boat for hours. They wanted to force it back to Libya. As these efforts failed, the gunmen started to shoot at the defenseless refugees and severely injured many of them. Soon the bullets punctured the boat, and it sank within minutes. Three dozen people died in the tragedy. Ahmed lost eight members of his family.⁴

Why do we read the story of the holy family's flight to Egypt and Herod's killing of the Bethlehem babies on this particular Sunday? It's still the Christmas season, is it not? And I'd probably rather read anything than this. Anything but the story about Jesus the refugee and the massacre of children.

Maybe we have this story because it's impossible to sentimentalize. No matter how much preaching and teaching we do about the Luke and Matthew versions of the birth of Jesus, the Christmas story still sticks in our mind as a sentimental Christmas pageant version. It is almost impossible for us to picture shepherds as anything other than 8-year-old boys in bathrobes. It is almost impossible for us to picture angels as anything other than adorable preschoolers with tinsel on their heads, rather than messengers of God that terrified those they approached. Over time we have taken the story of the birth of Jesus and made it part of our sweet and sentimental Christmas. And there is good and bad that comes with doing that. But it is *impossible* to sentimentalize the story we read today.

There's no way to make this story cute. Or sweet in any way. This is horrible. This is real world violence. And in the face of real world violence, this is where the incarnation really matters. This is where it really makes a difference that God became one of us.

Herod is threatened by Jesus. And he's not wrong. But not because Jesus wants his job. But because Jesus' kingdom, the Kingdom of God, opposes anyone who would claim absolute authority on earth, any forces of violence, particularly violence against the vulnerable. Jesus' power is not the same as earthly power, it is not power of violence and might, but power in vulnerability. We've seen Herods rise and fall, we've seen murder and genocide used as a weapon to try to control the world. But again and again, the power of God, the power of one who was vulnerable to violence, is the power that overcomes the violence and evil of this world.

We live in a world that is not so different than this world depicted in this story. Where mothers and fathers around the world are inconsolable because their children have been slaughtered. Where families flee in the dead of night to avoid the violence of tyrants. The world that God entered is this very real world. God was born in a land of trouble, tension, violence, and fear. God knows what it is to be a homeless refugee. Before he could walk and talk, his life was in danger by violent earthly powers.

⁴ <http://stories.unhcr.org/boglarka-balogh-journalist-p3845.html...> edited for public reading

Maybe we have this story to remind us that God became the most vulnerable of people—an infant refugee whose life was threatened by a powerful tyrant—and that ought to give us pause as we consider our responsibility toward vulnerable populations today.

Fatma, a 17-year Somali girl wears beautiful clothes. She and her mother decorated their hands with henna paint for the journey, as women in their culture often do to mark special events and transitions. The father of the family is full of happiness and pride, as he succeeded to bring his loved ones, wife and three children, to safety.

“In Mogadishu, Somalia there is no freedom, because there is no safety. When you go into the town to the market, you do not know whether you will come back alive or not. Al Shabab militia kill indiscriminately” explain Fatma and her younger brother, Dadir. “We have lost contact with our grandmother, grandfather and other members of the family long before we fled Mogadishu. We still do not know where they are, because telecommunication does not work and visiting them is too dangerous.” The children finished only a few classes in school. Their father worked as a tailor in Mogadishu and he was the first to flee. He arrived to Slovenia 3 years ago and immediately started to organize his family’s reunification. He sent a message to his family to move to neighboring Ethiopia as in Somalia they wouldn’t be able to get all the necessary documents for their departure. It took their father almost three years to get his refugee status and the permission for family reunification. Meanwhile, the rest of the family lived in Ethiopia and settled in a wooden one-room hut, where the mother made money by cooking and selling food.

But just before the family wanted to go to the airport to leave Ethiopia for Slovenia a last obstacle had come up as each family member had to obtain a so-called exit visa which cost 460 dollars each. Fatma’s family were really lucky because Slovenians donated enough money for the whole project through Slovenian Philanthropy and they bought the necessary visas.

When Fatma and Dadir talk about life in Slovenia they mention “peace” and “freedom” quite often. “There is not even a small place of happiness in war”, says Dadir. The children now have other, more pleasant issues to worry about – they want to study medicine in Slovenia.⁵

Maybe we have this jarring story from the Gospel of Matthew to remind us that the incarnation, the idea that God is God with us, is not just some sentimental notion, not some warm and fuzzy feeling that God is with us, but the very truth that God is with us in our suffering—even the worst kind of suffering. That God knows what it is to live a life that is troubled and threatened at every turn. And that is Good News. It is Good News for people who are in trouble around the world, and Good News for you and for me.

The threat on Jesus’ life doesn’t end with Herod. It will follow him all the way to the cross. But so will his power in vulnerability. And though in the garden, he’ll ask his Father for anything but this, understanding what he has to do, he’ll go to the cross. And through his death and resurrection, God’s power in vulnerability will be expressed in an ultimate way, and we’ll see God’s final victory over all of this—all of the sin, death, and evil of the world.

But I get ahead of myself. That’s Easter.
This is Christmas.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.

⁵ <http://stories.unhcr.org/fatmas-story-slovenia-p6945.html>...edited for public reading