

Matthew 2.13-23
Welcome to our World
WRCoB 12.26.21

According to the latest figures
There're 84 million people living in forced displacement.

Forced displacement is defined as
Refugees
Or those living in IDP camps
Or asylum-seekers.

They are what they are due to persecution or conflict
Generalized violence or human rights violations.

Of those 84 million people
35 million are children below the age of 18.

It is difficult to imagine what they have to go through.

I think about them as we celebrate Christmas
In the comfort of our homes.

Judith's family are hosts to internally displaced people
Who fled the violence of ethnic conflict
This very Christmas

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Fleeing a person's homeland
Because of violence, persecution or conflict
Is nothing new.

It's been happening since the beginning of time.

But the sheer numbers today are staggering.

Think about it. 84 million people!
That's the population of Germany, displaced!

Within our lifetimes
We have seen unprecedented migration numbers.

And whether it is due to ethnic cleansing
Religious upheaval
Political maneuvering
Or just vicious bandits and kidnappers

It is the innocent men, women, and children
Who end up suffering the most.

If they are fortunate enough to escape the slaughter
They find themselves in a foreign place
Dependent on the mercy of people
Who do not welcome them

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Jesus, welcome to our world!

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We enter the Christmas story
With feelings of peace
Glancing in on the manger

Jesus, surrounded by his loving parents
And those who came to witness the event.
Lavished with extravagant gifts from the East.

It is the epitome of peace.

We have recreated this scene over and over again
With our creches and nativity scenes.

It is deeply engrained in our minds and hearts.

And it would be nice to dwell on the good vibes
Generated by the Christmas Story.

But our Scripture Lesson today, the 1st Sunday of Christmas
Changes the scene of tranquility to one of horror.

Jesus' welcome is short-lived.

For within a scant two years of his birth
King Herod makes a political decision

That would forever change the lives of families
Living within the Bethlehem region.

Church history calls it the *Slaughter of the Innocents*.

It begins like this.

An angel comes and warns Joseph
To flee with his family to Egypt.

King Herod was on a rampage
Because the Magi didn't return with information
On the whereabouts of the Christ-child.

King Herod was a violent, cruel and merciless ruler.

Any threat to his rule was met with violence.

It is documented that Herod had his own sons put to death
Out of fear of competition for the throne.

Josephus, the Jewish historian
Stated that it would be better
To be Herod's swine than Herod's sons.

And so, the killing began.

It's a part of the Christmas Story we'd rather not think about.

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Matthew quotes from the Book of Jeremiah

Jeremiah witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem
And the forced displacement of Jews to Babylon.

Matthew 2:18 NIV

**¹⁸ “A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more.”**

Rachel, the wife to Jacob
Was considered the mother of the nation of Israel.

Tradition has it that she is buried
Alongside the road that leads out of Bethlehem.

Jeremiah suggests the dead matriarch
Mourned for the children of his day
As they bitterly plodded past her grave into exile.

Matthew quotes that, Rachel, from her grave's vantage point
Bears witness, this time
To the slaughter of the innocents
At the hand of Herod.

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Welcome to our world, Jesus!

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Ramah is our world.

And Rachel's is the voice of God weeping for the innocent.

We heard her weeping
As the people of Israel were forced from their homes
To live as refugees in Babylon.

We heard her voice as Herod's troops
Slaughtered the innocent children
In and around Bethlehem!

We heard her mourning as Jesus hung from the cross!

And in Rome during the persecution of 1st century Christians!

And during the Crusades
And in the Reformation
And during the Inquisition.

We heard her lament during the conquest of the Americas
And the colonialization of Africa.

We heard her weeping during the years
The African Americans were enslaved in the US

Again, we heard Rachel's cry in Nazi Germany
In Ruanda, in Bosnia, in Kosovo.

And yet today we hear her voice in Iraq, Afghanistan,
Syria, Myanmar, and Nigeria.

Rachel's is the voice of God
Weeping for her children who are no more.

A voice that will not be comforted.

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God knows firsthand the plight of the persecuted.
Experienced firsthand the life of a refugee.

He lived the life of the oppressed and marginalized.

My guess is that since we have no account
Of Jesus' life between the ages of 2 and 12

Those were the years they lived as refugees in Egypt.

Jesus never found a place he'd call home.
He was a stranger in a strange land.

He lived his early childhood
In a refugee camp in Egypt.

And then returned to live in Nazareth
His parents' home-town.

But as an adult, he was rejected by his very own people.

It is no wonder then that Jesus once said:

**Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests,
But the Son of Man has no place to lay his head**
(Matthew 8.20).

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Welcome to our world, Jesus!

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We, Brethren, were once forcibly displaced.

Along with our sister Anabaptist groups
We fled persecution in Europe in the early 1700s.

As disciples of Christ
The Brethren chose a course

Of homeless wandering, of rejection by the status-quo
Of persecution and possible death.

Such is the experience of Jesus
Such is our own history.

Menno Simons, the father of the Mennonite church
Speaks of God's people as refugees.

*How many pious children of God have we not seen during
the space of a few years deprived of their homes and
possessions for the testimony of God and their conscience
driven out of city and country.*

*They wander aimlessly hither and yon in want, misery, and
discomfort in the mountains, in deserts, holes and clefts of
the earth, as Paul says. They must take to their heels and*

flee away with their wives and little children from one country to another, from one city to another—

*Hated by all men, abused, slandered, mocked defamed,
trampled upon, labeled heretics.*

No room at the inn?

Knowing our own heritage, it shouldn't surprise us.

Our own history reminds us
That we too, because we follow Jesus
Are sojourners in this life.

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As a privileged, white, American, Christian
I never had to face persecution.
Due to my religion
Or my ethnicity
Nor due to the color of my skin.

I've never had to feel the deep hunger pains
While waiting for hours in a refugee camp line
For something to eat and drink.

But Jesus can relate!

And so can 84 million others today.

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From our vantage point
We blame the Innkeeper

For slamming the door in the face
Of two strangers seeking shelter.

But have we considered
The many homes in that small village?

Whose owners peek through their shuttered windows
As the couple went from place to place
Seeking somewhere to stay?

Welcome to our world, Jesus!

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And so, the question today is this.

Should the Christmas story
Inspire Americans to accept more refugees?

Google that question
And you come up with huge differences of opinion.

I, for one, says yes.
We should be inspired by our faith
To receive more refugees.

Rev. Dr. Serene Jones
President of Union Seminary in NY
Sums it up well.

I believe the Christmas story should open our eyes and our hearts to those most vulnerable in our midst. To those whose only hope is to travel by foot and inflatable raft for days in search of a livable life—many of whom look very much like the Middle Eastern Mary, Jesus' mother.

As followers of Jesus we are called to welcome the strangers of our time. To return the care shown by the Good Samaritan to today's marginalized communities. And to open our hearts and our doors to those seeking refuge this Christmas season, whatever their religion.

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We love to remember the warm and fuzzy side
Of the story of Christmas.

We're not so inclined to be reminded
Of the harsher realities of the story.

But it is there, and when we tell the story of Christmas
The way it really happened.

And compare it to today's stories of displace people

It may not altogether sound like a lullaby
But it rings with truth.

And even though Rachel weeps for her children
Refusing to be comforted

An angel heralds another truth
A truth filled with hope and promise

**For unto you is born this day,
In the city of David, a Savior,
Which is Christ the Lord.**

**Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace,
Good will toward men.**

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Welcome to our world, Jesus!