

Three Refugee Families

2nd Sunday after Christmas – Year B, Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, January 4, 2014

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Merry Christmas!

Twenty-three years ago (or was it twenty-four?), one dark night right at this time of year, an old man received a tip that as punishment for the people's unwillingness to turn over their store of onions and potatoes, the area military commander was going to level their village of mud-brick houses, and his people were to be relocated to camps in the slum suburbs of Baghdad. His son-in-law, had been drafted into the army and sent to a sector as far from his home as possible, to keep him from deserting. So the man gathered up his daughter and her two-year-old son, and began the journey south toward the relative safety of the Saudi Arabian border.

That same year, I was living in my sleeping bag on an Army cot just south of the border between Saudi Arabia and Iraq in the days before, during and after Operation Desert Storm, what is now usually called the *First Gulf War*. It was my job to coordinate the medical care and evacuation of coalition forces, prisoners of war, and indigenous civilians in an "area of interest" that covered many thousands of square miles. One afternoon as I toured a medical facility in our area, among *way* too many others, I met an old man, his daughter and her two-year old son. Mostly because the little boy's thick black hair and large brown eyes reminded me of my own three-year-old son back home, I stopped and visited for a moment with them – through an interpreter, of course. The young mother was being treated for a wound on her arm caused by the flying fragment of the mine that had killed one of their group the second night of their journey. It was the arm with which she had been carrying her young son, but, she said, *Alhamdulillah*, "praise be to God," her arm had shielded the boy from harm.

I don't know what happened to that family I knew for a moment in the desert. In the short time that I was aware of their existence, they became part of an immense *river* of refugees, all with similar stories to tell. I don't know how long that family journeyed. I don't know how long they lived as refugees, far from their home. Deprived of the resources and privileges that have made my own sons vigorous and strong, loving and creative, it's possible that that little boy may have grown up, like so many in that world, filled with bitterness and hatred. But I have *long* held in my heart the *hope* that, now that the would-be king is gone from his golden palaces, that *perhaps* that little boy has had a chance of survival. Perhaps because of the care of those along the way, and small acts of kindness from strangers that *could* have been enemies, *perhaps* he has grown up strong and safe. Perhaps, because of a mother's radical trust in God, one family has at least *begun* their journey home.

A couple of thousand years ago (give or take a few), a man living in a borrowed room in his ancestral home, was warned in a dream that his family was in danger. The man and his wife were convinced that their new-born son was the fulfillment of ancient prophecies that a new king would lead the people of Israel once again from bondage into freedom. It was a conviction confirmed by a steady stream of visitors to their new-born child. Most recently, distinguished, wealthy men had come from a far off land to pay a call on the family in Bethlehem. On their way, they had stopped to see the King, the powerful Herod the Great, builder of the fortress Masada and *rebuilder* of Solomon's great Temple. But the king, eager to consolidate and strengthen his

power, felt threatened by the ancient prophecies, and still more by one being hailed as the newborn King of the Jews.

And so, when an angel appeared to Joseph in his dreams, warning him that he needed to get his family out of Bethlehem, and safe from the king's hateful wrath, Joseph wasted no time. He gathered up his young wife and son, and he left family and friends and everything they had ever known. Taking only what they could carry with them, they left their home, and set off on their long journey to live as refugees, living among a people they didn't know, in a land that their ancestors had fled generations before.

We don't know much about their journey. We don't know much about what happened to the family while they lived as refugees. Scholars and authors and sometimes even preachers *speculate*, but we don't know what effect that life had on their young son. We don't know how his mother's radical trust in God, *baruch atah Adoni*, "praised be the Lord," tempered and transformed that life. But we *do* know, because the Gospel tells us, that when the king had died, Joseph and Mary and their young son, Jesus, returned to the land of God's promises and made their home once again amid the fragrant, fertile hills of Galilee.

A few thousand years ago (or maybe it was a few million), the whole human race began a journey. I've talked about the beginning of the journey before, and I'll no doubt talk about the beginning again. But the upshot is that we are *here*, and we are *now*, in a world that is *sometimes* dark, and *sometimes* broken, and *always* something *less* than the goodness of God's creation. We were created to be part of the perfection of that created goodness. But we are *now*, and we are *here* – as refugees in space and time, far from our true home.

Here and now, in the brokenness that we have made of creation, we surround ourselves with creature comforts, we pile up accomplishments and possessions, and we busy ourselves *trying* to connect, *trying* to find peace, *trying* to find our way home. But inside we know that nothing can complete us, nothing can truly satisfy our deepest longings, *nothing* can truly make us whole, as long as we are separated from the one who created us, from the one who sustains us, from the one who has redeemed us and called us to himself. "He chose us in Christ," Paul tells us, "before the *foundation* of the world." "And destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ." We *belong* to another family. We were created for another home. We are destined to sing another song of praise. And, let me tell you, dear friends, we *are* on our way home.

We do not know how long our journey will be. We do not know what about ourselves is being tempered and what is being transformed along the way. We do not yet know all the other lives we are meant to touch and temper and transform as we journey together. We do not know what life will look like when the journey is completed. But we know that *are* on our journey. We *are* on our way home. Because that baby born in Bethlehem, that little child that was hustled off to safety in the middle of a dark, dark night, that returned refugee was and *is, in fact* the promised King of Kings. And through this one, *maranatha*, "come, O Lord," we are *all* made whole, we are *all* his children, we are *all* on our way home.

One more time: Merry Christmas.