

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph Were Asylum Seekers

Ken Wilson, 07.01.2018

So many things going down—challenge to know how much to address. I try to check myself: don't see it as my job to tell you how to think about events of the day. I certainly don't want this time, set aside for the reading and commenting on sacred Scripture, organized around the news cycle

But times when our sacred text and current events so align, are so relevant, that not to address them would be tone deaf. Today.

Our nation is deeply divided far beyond the usual differences between liberal & conservative. Oh, for the days when these were our differences! Today we face deeper questions of identity. Who are we? What do we stand for?

The asylum seekers crisis is but latest example. Entire families have been making a perilous journey from their homes in Central America (Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador), through Mexico, to the borders of this country. Often, parents face horrible choices Drug cartels/ gangs are recruiting their children: join our gang or you'll pay a heavy price—you'll be murdered, disfigured, or raped.

Our Gov't decided to separate these parents from their children at border, with no clear plan to reunite them. Over 2K children are now incarcerated against the will of their parents—because their families are asylum seekers. Our AG buttressed this policy by appeal to Romans 13, which enjoins Christians to obey their rulers—all things being equal. In this case all things not equal.

I'd like to offer what I think is a more relevant text...Mt. 2

Let me set the scene: Jesus is born to Mary and Joseph, who haven't had a moment's peace. They are forced by the govt to make a perilous journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem just before the birth. Astrologers from Persia have arrived in response to heavenly signs to search for Israel's newborn King. Herod, the existing King feels threatened. Herod sends the astrologers to find child and return with the news of his location. They go, find him in Bethlehem but are warned in a dream not to disclose this information to Herod, who is a bad actor, who like many leaders today, manipulates religious leaders own nefarious purposes.

Let's pick up the story here: **Matthew 2: 13–15**

This episode tucked away in birth narrative of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew. Only Mathew & Luke have birth narratives. And we're used to hearing the birth narratives in Christmas Carols: *Little Town of Bethlehem, It Came Upon a Midnight Clear, Silent Night*

This one is part of the story of the three wise men, which we usually save for the Sunday after Christmas when everyone is in a state of consumer exhaustion, too many Christmas cookies.

So we miss the emotional impact. It's every parent's nightmare.

A few of our kids got croup at night. Do you know that drill? One time Amy's throat was constricting with croup, voice rising by the second. I was a nurse, I knew we had to act—threw her in the car and made like a bandit to the ER

But let's not miss the emotional impact: Joseph and Mary are unaware of any danger, when Joseph has a dream in which an angel says, ***“Wake up! And take the child and his mother and flee into Egypt, for Herod intends to seek out the child in order to destroy him!” And waking, he took the child and his mother in the night and departed into Egypt.***

That's a trip of 430 miles as the crow flies, but you can't get there as the crow flies. They walked: route included mountains, valleys, rivers, desert and wilderness. There were bandits and killers hiding along the wayside. We have no idea how long it took. They would only have initiated such a journey, perilous as it was, as a last resort. Made journey for one reason: terrified for their child.

So we have a nearly exact equivalent to these Central American Asylum Seekers, coming as family units to U.S. Incredibly long and perilous journey—often they have to decide to leave in a hurry, son or daughter is threatened by the gangs, relatives are killed when kids don't join and it reaches a crisis: gotta leave now! Hounded by warlords, cartel lord, gang lords every bit as corrupt and hard hearted as Herod. People who want to destroy their kids

The only Mary, Joseph, Jesus would have survived such a journey would be the kindness of strangers. Literally they would have required the dozens and dozens of strangers on such a journey

Can you remember how it felt when you were on a trip and you had a need and you encountered the kindness of a stranger?

(Julia's cottage, remote location, her car gets flat—I used to fix flat tires all time, but then AAA, lazy, never fix flats, call AAA, too remote, and new husband want to fix, but unfamiliar, crappy little lug nut wrench an lug nuts are tight—then a pickup truck pulls up)

We are all dependent on the kindness of strangers for survival. So much so, our bodies release a potent cocktail of pleasure chemicals when we help strangers (more than friends-family)

When we deaden this response, we deaden our own humanity.

When Mary, Joseph and Jesus, depending on the kindness of strangers for their long journey arrived in Egypt, they were not turned away at the border. They were not separated—Mary and Joseph put into detention while strangers took Jesus into makeshift cages in a renovated Wal-Mart. They were received, they were welcomed. They were treated as humans in the image of God must be treated if we are to retain our humanity.

Egypt in the Bible is the first super-power. “From the beginning of the biblical narrative Egypt is presented as an imposing place of abundance and power. Egypt embodies the political and military temptation to turn to idolatrous superpowers instead of to YHWH in times of acute national crisis” (Dictionary of Biblical Imagery)

Egypt is the closest equivalent in the Bible besides Babylon to today's most powerful nation, USA. Egypt, like the United States built up its wealth on the back of slaves—who were never blessed in their emancipation but only harassed and persecuted.

But Egypt, even Egypt, did not stoop cruel practice of separating the child Jesus from his parents in name of making Egypt great again. Without the humane treatment of the holy family in Egypt we would have no Jesus.

Hear the word of Lord, “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Ex. 22: 21)

“You shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the sojourner” Lev. 19: 9–10

“The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in Egypt.” (Lev. 19: 34)

Jesus elevated this single verse to summarize the Bible as he read the Bible: this is the Law and the Prophets according to Jesus.

The theme of the stranger is so important in the Bible it cannot be underestimated. The followers of Jesus are called “strangers in a strange land.” Virtually every book of the Bible reinforces this theme. You cannot miss it. And it’s at the heart of our spirituality because if we do not welcome the stranger we cannot welcome God because God, in Hebrew thought is the Ultimate Other. This is what it means to say God is Holy. We can only welcome God, be reconciled to God, enjoy the company of God as much as we are willing to welcome the foreigner, the stranger, the asylum seeker.

So we live in a time when a great hardening of the heart is spreading across our land, modeled from the highest places of power. The prophet Ezekiel called it the heart of stone as opposed to the heart of flesh—meaning the unfeeling, uncompassionate heart, the heart that denies its own humanity.

What are we to do? Rise up! Not take it sitting down. Our elected officials are not doing their job, so we have to do our job. Every one of us is called to lean our hearts toward the other, the immigrant, the foreigner, the outsiders, the stranger.

If our hearts are leaning in this direction, the opportunities will present themselves—and every move we make in this direction will be a move toward God.

- Read the story so you can tell the story

The majority of Christian (Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Episcopal) get their Bible through the lectionary readings every Sunday, and my priest wife tells me that it’s quite possible to go to church every Sunday for years and never hear this story. Needs to change

- Groceries for the Food Panty
- Friday bond hearings
- Come to church if only to support our LGBTQ members
- Open our hearts to the experience of People of Color
- Ask God to give us hearts of flesh—feeling hearts, not the hard hearts that are being modeled by those with power.

We are called to be a community of comfort and encouragement and compassion to one another in these times and to those who have most to lose if this hardening of the American heart continues, or spreads, or gains ground.