

“God on the Move”  
Matthew 2:13b-23  
Jan 1, 2023  
New Year’s Day  
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Merry Christmas, friends. Yes, it is still the Christmas season! We are right in the middle of the 12 days of Christmas that begin on the 25<sup>th</sup> and stretch until the 5<sup>th</sup> of January. During the Christmas season, we have been surrounded by decorations of red and green, by lights strung up in trees and on houses and in parks, by the words Hope Peace Joy Love characterizing this season—and yet, we know that Christmas contains many emotions, many challenges, many tensions and anxieties and griefs. Likewise, the Christmas story that we love to tell, and that we did tell on Christmas Eve, complete with sound effects, contains more than the smooth birth of an angelically announced child in a neat and clean stable with kind animals all around.

The Christmas story as told in Matthew’s gospel includes political intrigue, a jealous tyrant, and a horrific event commonly referred to as the Massacre of the Innocents. And this is all before we get to the magi, those wise ones who showed up late to the party—Bruce will talk about them when he preaches next week.

For now, we enter into the discomforting side of the Christmas story—and a part of the story that seems to make the Christmas story come to life among us, particularly for people living close to the margins of society.

You may notice when reading through this gospel that Matthew is often saying “XYZ happened as it had been written...” and then cite a scripture from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, or another prophet. One of the priorities of the writer of Matthew’s gospel was to establish that Jesus was the Messiah that had been foretold in prophecies in the Hebrew Bible.

Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder, a professor of New Testament at Chicago Theological Seminary, writes, “Fulfillment language can point to painful moments in a people’s history. It is wording that joins one period of time to another. It offers a continuum between the past and the present. For Matthew the use of such linguistic cues helps to show Jesus, even as a baby, as the culmination of what was promised. He was the foretold Savior of the World. Emmanuel—God is with us—sojourns from time through time and in time. Navigating Egypt, evil, and egos this is the Messiah—the Anointed One.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-christmas/commentary-on-matthew-213-23-6>

So we see that Matthew is all about drawing connections between stories—showing how God is on the move bringing Jesus as the One foretold and relating that to how God was on the move in lives of the Hebrew people in the times of the prophets.

In a spiritual sense, it is easy for us to recognize that God is a mobile God—we are each made in God’s image, moving around the world with the Holy Spirit enlivening us. We often remind each other that we are the hands, feet, mouths and movement of the Divine in the world.

And in quite a literal sense, we also recognize that Jesus was a refugee. Jesus and his family moved from Judea to Egypt because they were being hunted by the strong forces of a powerful and jealous tyrant. They were being threatened in their homeland and had to seek refuge in Egypt.

Enter again, Matthew’s interest in showing Jesus as the fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy. Eric Barreto, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, writes that the author of Matthew’s gospel used the storied character of Moses to show Jesus’ extraordinary nature, connecting the two people and their stories. Like Moses, Jesus had an amazing birth story. Like Moses, Jesus had to seek refuge in Egypt as a baby, after being threatened by the powers that be. They tyrant of Jesus’ day, Herod the Great, is presented narratively by Matthew as a new Pharaoh, the tyrant of Moses’ day.

Again, Dr. Buckhanon Crowder writes, “Not only does the story after the birth of Jesus wind through Egypt, it is rooted in evil. How ironic that a narrative about redemption, salvation, and reconciliation must first wade through the abyss of egomaniacal behavior. Jesus coming into the world is bracketed with Herod who fakes worship on one end while instituting infanticide on the other. History repeats itself. Such atrocity had happened in Egypt before the Exodus. It happened on the way to Egypt a millennium later. Its perpetual lesson reminds us that the most vulnerable suffer when the most powerful are irresponsible.”<sup>2</sup>

Stories are powerful. They shape us and shape our world. When you think about it, and you trim a story down to character types and tropes and plot devices, there are not a lot of new stories. But there *are* new ways to relate to stories every day, in how we relate to the characters, in the impact of place and time and context on the plot, in associations we make with political machinations and events in our world, in the lessons we can learn from stories as old as time. We tell stories that have familiar narratives so we can understand our place in the world and how to relate. And the Biblical stories serve this purpose, too.

Since we are looking at stories to help us understand how the world works and our place in it, we should not be hard pressed to say that Jesus was a refugee, and that refugees today take a similar

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-christmas/commentary-on-matthew-213-23-6>

path to Jesus in their quest for safety and belonging and home. However, while Jesus was able to return to his hometown after a few years hiding in Egypt, many refugees do not have the same opportunity.

According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, refugees are people who are “unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.”<sup>3</sup>

Through my contacts in the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America ~Bautistas por la Paz, I have had the humbling opportunity to meet migrants and refugees coming to the USA, as well as people who work with them and accompany them through the immigration and asylum-seeking process. I’ve heard stories of people who leave their homes because of war, genocide, gang violence and pressure on young people to join gangs, drug wars, domestic violence, lack of acceptance of (and direct threat to) LGBTQIA+ people, violence against women and sexual exploitation, recruiting of children for soldiers, land disappearing and resource loss due to climate change and more. I’m sure each of you could add reasons that you know of why people leave their home countries.

When the word spread that Herod the Great was hunting the family of the child being called “King” in Judea, Jesus’ parents did what any loving guardians of children would do: try to keep him safe at any cost. They trusted that God would show them a way to safety. And the Holy did just that, giving Joseph dreams to guide him, just as dreams guided Joseph’s ancestor of the same name, who also found refuge in a life in Egypt.

In the USAmerican media, we regularly witness inconsistencies and double standards in how migration is portrayed, based on the race or country of origin of the refugee or migrant. Black Haitians at the Texas-Mexico border are chased by Border Patrol on horseback with whips, while white Ukrainians were exempted from Title 42, a COVID-era policy limiting immigration that has been used to block asylum seekers at the southern border. In a post on the Doctors Without Borders blog, Avril Benoit, executive director of the organization in the USA, said, “Exemptions to Title 42 for Ukrainians show that the US government is perfectly capable of processing people efficiently and with dignity when it dedicates the resources and when there is political will to do so...People should be allowed to seek asylum based on their need for protection and not based on their nationality, origin, race, or ethnicity—in accordance with US domestic and international law.”

What if Jesus was crossing borders today? Borders within his homeland, now known as Israel and Palestine and the West Bank. As a person of color, what would his experience be? As a Jewish person, what would his experience be? There is much to wonder, and ponder, and learn from asking these questions.

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<sup>3</sup> UNHCR

Risking anachronism, I wonder what would happen if Jesus came to the USA on foot today, with his parents? Would they have the right documents? Would they have a contact in the USA that they're trying to reach? Would Jesus, merely two or three years old, be pried away from his parents and kept in a cage, as so many children of color have been over the past few years?

Friends, part of being a follower of Jesus today means learning from his story that God is especially near to the poor and oppressed, the forgotten and the disenfranchised. Jesus' story shows us that we most often know God's face in one another, and so we see the face of God in those who are on the move today. Those fleeing gang violence in Colombia, those fleeing political instability and lack of work in Haiti, those fleeing the war in Ukraine, those fleeing violence against women in Mexico, those fleeing civil war and violent unrest in the Congo. Those fleeing domestic violence and abuse right here in our neighborhood, here in Seattle.

Last Saturday night, on Christmas Eve, I returned home from our Christmas Eve service, full of love and candlelight and gratitude for our church family, and I opened up the Twitter app on my phone. The top story was of a bus filled with migrants sent to Washington, DC by Texas Governor George Abbott. The Governor has been bussing migrants from the Texas border to Democratically controlled cities since last April in a move to antagonize the Biden administration, using vulnerable people as political pawns.

On Christmas Eve, people were left out in the cold, turned away from shelter, told there was no room in the inn. And the remarkable part isn't that this happened on Christmas Eve, but that it happens every single day, far away and in our own city. Every day, people are being turned away, migrants are being used as political pawns, the powerful do not listen to those in need. Every day, Christ is a refugee, Christ is on the streets, Christ is shipped off to DC in 18-degree weather.

Beloved church, in this new year, we cannot sit by while Christ is mistreated and left out in the cold and put in cages and hunted by tyrants. In this new year, let us remember the stories that have been told over and over, that tell us that a different kind of world is possible, if only we would make it so. And then, let us make it so. Let us find our place in the narrative: as the midwives who opposed Pharaoh by protecting Hebrew baby boys; as Mary and Joseph finding a way to safety for their young child; as people raising their voices and using our resources to advocate for people who seek refuge, acceptance, peace, opportunity, food, and life itself.

Let us, empowered by the incarnation of Love among us, and the example of Jesus of Nazareth, shape our community into a place of hospitality, inclusion and love without borders. May it ever be so. Amen.