

Why Did They Do It?

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Grace Church in New York
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Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him. (Matthew 2: 13)

I don't know about you, but I was just settling in to enjoy Christmas. There was all of the excitement of last week. In my case, I'd not had the pleasure of being up here in the chancel for a decade. Now it's only the ninth day of Christmas, 9 ladies dancing and all of that. At home our tree is still guzzling up water and not dropping needles, and Christmas cards are still showing up in my post box. And what happens? You've heard it. I just read it. It's time to move on. Mary, Joseph, and their baby, Jesus, have to move on, and to Egypt of all places.

If I were going to be droll, you'd probably call it sacrilegious, I'd say, "Why did they do it? I was just getting comfortable with the story." But maybe that is just what we should do; find out why they did it. Why would they take to the road again? Wasn't the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem enough?

For the moment, it all hinges on Herod the Great, whose name, at least, we probably know. What else do we know about him? He was born in southern Palestine in 73 BC. Rome at this time was newly an empire and the well-remembered Pax Romana wasn't quite in place yet. A schemer of the first order, Herod worked his way to the top in the Roman bureaucracy, but it was along a ruthless road of assassinations and murders.

The prize for his hard work was the favor and patronage of Caesar Augustus, no less. He had become a "client king" of Augustus. He had power, but could be overruled by Rome. That said, nothing was too much for Herod's ambition. On one hand, for example, he went to great trouble to redevelop Jerusalem and establish the importance of the city of Caesarea. Amongst other things Herod restored the great temple in Jerusalem, even though Judaism was of little interest to him.

On the other hand, at home he showed one of his least pleasant characteristics, jealousy which of course gets in the way of good judgment. He was married to ten women, and had 15 children of whom 10 were sons. Sad to say, he managed to assassinate at least three of his sons. Somehow they posed a threat to his importance and position. Believe or not, there is a story that on his deathbed he probably realized that he wouldn't have many mourners. So he had a large number of people rounded up in Jerusalem and ordered that they be executed on the day he died. Why, you ask? So that there would be many mourners in the city, seemingly there to mourn him. But I digress.

Let's go back to Matthew's record and the first line of the Gospel lesson, "Now when the Wise Men had departed ..." We remember the encounter of the Wise Men with Herod. These men from the East came to Jerusalem not only to find the king of the Jews, but also to worship him. It might be one thing for Herod, an outrageously jealous man, to hear that unexpected foreigners

were looking for someone on his turf. But they were searching for a king, (read competition,) and one to be worshipped, (read adoration). It was just too much.

Perhaps you remember the rest. Herod summoned these men and, lying through his teeth, he sought their help in finding the King of the Jews so that he too might worship him. The Wise Men made their way to Bethlehem, performed their adoration, and offered their fabulous gifts. But “being warned in a dream” they didn’t go back to Herod, but went home another way.

What was Herod’s reaction to being outsmarted? More to the point, what was his reaction to the certainty that out there someplace was a child who just might be able to replace him? What might you do if you were paranoid and unsure of your hold on your power? Would you tolerate any challenges? True to form, Herod ordered the hideous and evil slaughter of all boys younger than two years in hope that the child, Jesus, would be got rid of. And now we see Mary, Joseph, and their new born baby boy getting packed up to escape to freedom and new life.

At Christmas a year or two ago one of our more provocative politicians tweeted, “Merry Christmas everyone-here’s to a holiday filled with happiness, family, and love for all people (including refugee babies in mangers + their parents.) Mary, Joseph, and Jesus refugees.” Have you ever thought of them as refugees? Some version of this story is still going on this morning as you and I are here in Grace Church on Broadway in New York City. We’ve seen it in the morning news. We know what it looks like even on our phone screens. We may even have argued about what to do about it.

Of course we could recall that the Biblical record is replete with wandering, homeless people whom God loves, but who are at the mercy of others. Who do I have in mind? Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael, Jacob and his wives and children, Moses and all of the people of the Exodus, David, Elijah, Paul and all of the apostles. I’m getting carried away. So it seems that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are merely three more. I could conclude that though these characters were undocumented and unwelcome they had one thing going for them. That is, that they proved to be vital to God’s unfolding story of grace.

But Matthew wanted us to be certain that we understand the flight of the Holy Family was prefigured in the Old Testament, that it truly continued salvation history. As the only one of the gospel writers to tell us about the flight into Egypt, Matthew puts the spotlight on Joseph as the one to whom the dream came. Does he want us to recall another Joseph, Jacob’s son? That Joseph also ended up in Egypt and not by choice. His brothers followed him. Their migration in time lead to the enslavement of Israel. At one point Pharoah ordered all Hebrew male babies slaughtered in the hope of controlling the growing and unhappy community. Sound familiar?

But there was one male child who escaped that slaughter, Moses. It was he who led Israel from Egypt to freedom, to a new life. Is Matthew suggesting that a New Exodus is going to be led by the refugee, Jesus? All of this cast are truly refugees proving to be vital to God’s story of grace! Yet this is not the end of the story. It can’t be the end of the story, because I believe that you and I are part of this gospel episode.

We are refugees. In one way or the other we’ve all fled to Egypt. I don’t think that there’s a traffic jam on that road, but I expect some of us are on it right now. Is it safe to stay where you are now or that the way things are for you now are okay? Have the economy, health, or family issues forced you to be in places which are absolutely unfamiliar. Or have you actually had to go

to a new land or foreign place at a moment's notice? Is there anyone here who has not felt one of these challenges at one time or another?

There is a preacher, however, who has suggested that there's another side to refugee-ism. As he put it, "It's also about a deep longing and drive for a new life and a new place in life." In his candid way he observed that it's not easy or safe, but we never go alone. Again Matthew comes to our rescue. (Matthew 8:19- 20) He records that after Jesus had healed Peter's mother-in-law and many others, he was surrounded with great crowds. And he ordered them to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. A scribe came up and told Jesus he would follow him anywhere. Jesus replied that the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head. Could he be a refugee again? Seems so.

But there is a characteristic of Jesus the refugee. It is that he is with us when we are refugees. This is so when we are refugees from a relationship that was disastrous or violent. He is with us when we are refugees from depression or feeling we have no meaning, when we feel we are neglected or abused. He is with us when we are refugees from grief and sorrow.

In addition, maybe we are called to view others who are refugees in a new and exciting way. Today's Collect makes just this point. *"O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your son Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."*

This powerful prayer makes it more than clear that, as a blogger, Jon Lewis, suggests, Christmas day is not merely the birth of a baby, "even the birth of a baby into perilous circumstances... but the mystical joining together of human and divine in a way that honors, vindicates and transforms our notions of human nature." Through this little baby all of us refugees, lost, unwelcome, no matter what the cause, have our dignity that God has wonderfully created, now more wonderfully restored. What a Christmas gift. What an everyday gift. Yet, this puts the question, "Can we be part of God's work of restoration?" Can we show that we are also agents of the unfolding of his grace?

Later in Matthew's gospel, the little baby Jesus, all grown up, tells us this: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to me. Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine you did for me." (Matthew 25: 35-36, 40) Jesus is every refugee we see anywhere, any time. We see him in the subway, on the bus, on the sidewalk, maybe on the sofa next to us, or playing football on the school field.

My original question was "Why did Mary and Joseph flee with the baby Jesus? Obviously, to save Jesus' life for the grace, salvation and new life he would unfold. But let us never forget that they also fled by way of reminding us not to close the borders of our hearts; not to build walls and lock the doors of our minds; not to let prejudice and fear loose in our souls; or to tell the world there's no room in the inn for the other women, men, girls, or boys.

Can we manage not to forget this in 2022? As we face the many challenges that await us in 2022, let make this kind of openness our kind of life.

AMEN