

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

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## **Fleeing the Fear of Herod**

Now after the wise men had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, 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.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until Herod died. - Matthew 2:1-15

On June 20, 2013, my niece and her mother were at home in downtown High River when they noticed water rising in their back yard. By the time they got out to the front street, the water was so deep and moving so quickly my niece couldn’t stand in it. My brother was at work when he learned that the neighborhood had been flooded, but it was not long before the whole city was evacuated, and with everyone going in different directions, it was several hours before he was able to track his family down. When he did, he learned that just when they thought they might be overwhelmed by the flood, a front-end loader happened by. They rode to safety in the bucket of the loader. If that loader hadn’t come along, they might not be here today.

My colleague, Rev. Susan Lukey, who is minister at the High River United Church, was alone at work when she noticed the water coming in the back door of the church. Initially she thought it was another minor flood, like they often get in High River and started moving stuff onto desks and tables to protect it from the water. Within a few minutes, she was looking for a place to climb onto herself. As the water poured in, moving too quickly to make wading safe, she retreated to the sanctuary and climbed onto a ledge below the stained glass window, where she was trapped as darkness fell. Her husband and children escaped to stay with friends in Calgary, but they didn’t know where she was, and she didn’t know where they were. It was a long night of anxiety for them and their friends, before she was rescued the next morning and the family were reunited.

My brother, niece, ex-sister-in-law and colleagues were among the 13,000 residents of High River who became internally displaced persons that day. They joined the residents of Slave Lake who had suffered a similar fate two years previously, and were joined by the residents of Fort McMurray three years after that, and are joined every summer by members of First Nations communities who are evacuated because of the threat of fire or flood. Every resident of those communities has their own story, and every one of them has their own trauma. I don't mean to trivialize the trauma they experienced when I say that as forced migrants go, the residents of those communities are among the lucky ones. They were well looked after during their displacement and were able to go back home within a few weeks.

Around the world, for many different reasons, people leave their homes and become migrants. Some, like my brother's family and neighbours flee a natural disaster. Some become migrants for economic reasons, in search of a better life, like those who come to Alberta from Eastern Canada looking for work. Sometimes, as in the case of Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus, it is because of persecution, violence or the threat of violence.

Every two seconds, around the world, a person is displaced, forced to leave home because of persecution or violence. That is nearly 45,000 every single day. The most recent statistics from the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) are that there are currently nearly 70 million people displaced by persecution, violence, or the threat of violence. Most of those, about 40 million are internally displaced, meaning that they are able to stay within their home country. But if they cross a border because of a well-founded fear of persecution, violence or social disruption, they are considered refugees, according to the international accepted definition of that term. There are over 25 million of those, and half of them are children. There are another 10 million who are stateless persons, who because of discrimination or the dissolution of a state are denied a nationality. Last year, there were more than six million refugees from Syria, four and a half million Palestinians, and two and a half million from both Afghanistan and South Sudan. Then there

are those from Myanmar, Yemen, the Congo, and many other places where social unrest forces people from their homes.

Imagine for a moment, what it would be like to flee your home in fear, as the story we just heard from Matthew tells us the Holy Family had to do. Imagine what it would be like to quickly gather your most valued possessions into a car or a backpack and flee for your lives. Imagine what you would take with you, how much you might have to leave behind. Among

what you might need to leave behind are whatever members of your family aren't with you at the moment you have to flee; you would likely be separated from your extended family and social circle; what you need to leave behind is almost everything that makes your life *your life*.

Now try to imagine where you might go. You likely wouldn't have much choice. Perhaps you have a relative or an acquaintance in some safe country, but for now, you just need to stay safe, one day at a time, looking for what help, what hospitality you can find. You put one foot in front of the other, take one step at a time, pushing yourself beyond the limits of exhaustion. You can't stop until you find a safe place where you can rest.

If you are in a poor unstable country, you are likely to end up in a neighboring country, also poor and perhaps just a bit more stable. Eighty-five percent of refugees end up in poor countries, which are the least able to provide them with the services they need. Just to illustrate this, if you were born in January or February, can you please raise your hand? Now can those who were born in the other ten months of the year put up your hands? That is about 85%. Only 15% or two out of twelve refugees ever make it to the developed world, to Europe or North America. Of the six million refugees from Syria, for example, three and a half million are in Turkey, one million



Figure 1 - *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, by Orazio Gentileschi (1563-1639), public domain.

are in Iran, one million in Lebanon. That adds up to five and a half million, or 88% of those who fled Syria. The ten or fifteen thousand who made it to Canada amount to less than half of one percent of the total.

And if you think that some Canadians were a bit reluctant to welcome those refugees, imagine if you were a resident in a little village on the Turkish side of the border with Syria when both countries were at peace:

Imagine that prior to the Syrian civil war you were probably already frustrated with the services your state and national government provides. You had potholes in your roads, the school was falling apart and medical care was far short of what you would like. But in March of 2011 the civil war erupts across the border in Syria. At first there is a trickle of people fleeing the violence, but then there are hundreds and then thousands and then hundreds of thousands of people moving up what used to be your quiet front street, setting up make-shift tents in the fields, digging through your garbage looking for food, draining the creek with their thirst, and polluting what is left with their waste. It isn't long before a city of refugees covers the hills for miles around. An influx of desperate people who don't speak your language, know your customs or have any idea where to find help. It is bewildering, confusing and terrifying. Even the most compassionate person is likely to become pretty defensive, to want to bar the doors and barricade the border. I get that. Large movements of people create tension wherever they go. But while compassion and generosity often relieve tension, there are limits to our generosity, and reaching those limits can generate anxiety and fear. Giving in to fear, however, often produces even more fear and anxiety.

The gospel according to Matthew frankly acknowledges that there are forces in creation opposed to the creative purposes of God. Those forces are symbolized by King Herod. Herod stands for all the forces of chaos and cruelty, all the suffering and oppression and death, all the earthquakes and floods and fires and storms, all the disease and heartbreak that afflict God's creation and render it something other than what God intends. These forces exist, and they are powerful. Herod hears that a new king of the Jews has

been born, and he is afraid, and so he orders all the baby boys in Bethlehem to be killed. He is cruel, he is heartless, but ultimately, he is a pathetic figure, because he acts from fear. He is threatened by the infant king. And here is the confrontation of human and divine power. God enters human life as a vulnerable baby, and in the weakness of that child is the real nature of divine power.

The power of raging rivers, forest fires, earthquakes and tsunamis are awesome in their devastation. The power of a tyrant to destroy lives and engender terror is impressive in its cruelty. The power of fear to manipulate people is astonishing. These forces are so powerful that they evoke an almost religious awe. But this is not God's power. In the vulnerability of the birth and life and death of Jesus, God became vulnerable, and that vulnerability seemed like weakness. Ultimately, however, God's weakness proved stronger than human strength.

As Rabbi Harold Kushner pointed out, the real acts of God are not, whatever the insurance companies may say, the natural disasters that devastate communities and kill children. The real acts of God are the people who respond to suffering with serving love, who embody God's love and care in every person. After the High River flood and the Fort McMurray fire, emergency workers and firefighters converged from hundreds of miles to help out. Neighbouring communities opened their arenas, community centers and churches to host the displaced. Alberta Emergency Services coordinated it all, and when the community was safe, thousands of volunteers came from all over to clean up. That seems like the real power of God.

When large movements of people cross the borders of poor and unstable countries in fear of violence or persecution, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees mobilizes quickly. Their 17,000 employees work in 138 countries. And then there are the non-profits: Doctors Without Borders mobilizes to provide medical care, and Shelterbox brings in thousands of

boxes filled with tents, cooking implements and everything else a displaced family needs. That seems like the real power of God.

Jesus' life began in vulnerability, the vulnerability of infancy. But he became more vulnerable still when his family was forced to flee to Egypt to escape the murderous intentions of Herod. Jesus, Mary and Joseph became refugees. But that story is not just an isolated event. It has happened over and over, and it continues to happen today. The story of Jesus, Mary and Joseph shapes our way of thinking about vulnerable people. Some people think of refugees as criminals or intruders, blaming them for their circumstances, thinking that if only we build the right kind of wall, they will stay home or go somewhere else. This story encourages us to see refugees as the beloved children of God, cultivate our empathy and find ways, even in challenging circumstances to treat them with dignity. Amen.