

Jesus the Immigrant

Matthew 2:13-23

Rev. Felicia Fox, First Baptist Church, Mount Olive, N.C.

Have you even been suddenly woken up in the middle of the night? I was last year. It was about 3:00 in the morning. I was curled up fast asleep without a care in the world. Then I heard glass breaking somewhere in my house. A second later the burglar alarm was beeping. I jumped up and grabbed a walking stick from behind my bedroom door and rushed out into the rest of the house ready to throw down with the robber. I meet a dark figure in the dining room. As I pulled back ready to unleash the figure, she spoke. It was my mother. Luckily for both of us I never took a swing. I flicked on the lights and we discovered what had happened. Our cat had knocked over a vase right under the glass sensor for the alarm system.

My wakeup call was as unexpected but not nearly as important as the one Joseph received in Matthew 2:13-23. Imagine the fear and sense of urgency having an angel appear in a dream and tell you to move your family right that very moment because the life of your child was in danger. It must have been a very frightening dream. That same night the family hit the road and began the journey towards a new home in Egypt.

I really hadn't paid much attention to this story in the past. Usually when I read this chapter of Matthew, I focus on the first half where we find the familiar account of the wise men presenting gifts to a baby Christ. We love that part of the Christmas story. We include the wise men in our manger scenes. We say we give gifts to each other to remember the gifts the wise men offered to a tiny, helpless, poor child born to an unwed teenage girl. We are so used to that part of the story that it seems normal to us. We read through the stories of the birth of Christ without thinking about how shocking the story would have been to the first people to hear it.

To help us understand the shock value of this story let's imagine what that scene would look like today in our own culture. What if Donald Trump, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffett walked up to a poor, immigrant child who had no home and no clothing to call his own and presented that child with gold, diamonds, and wads of cash? A story like that wouldn't seem normal to us. In fact a story like that would make the news and we would talk about it for days. But that's exactly who the wise men traveled to see, worship, and give gifts to.

The fact that Jesus was born as a poor, immigrant child with nothing to call his own is pretty radical. If all that wasn't bad enough the story again takes a twist. The Christ child sent to save the world is now in danger of being killed. Joseph hears the warning

and begins to take the same action any loving father would. He makes sure his son will be safe even if it means becoming a refugee.

A refugee is a person who has been forced to leave their home because of dangerous circumstances such as war or a natural disaster. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus find themselves becoming refugees overnight. One minute they are asleep and the next running for their lives.

Can you imagine the heartbreak it must have caused them to leave their home and everything familiar? Following the call God had given each of them to protect, love, and raise the Savior of the world was more important than their own comfort or safety. That's a lesson we can all learn from them.

We know that the danger was real for this family. Herod did send in his troops. If Joseph had not listened to his wake up call the outcome for Jesus would have been much different. What if Joseph had not been willing to get up in the middle of the night? What if getting a few extra hours of sleep was more important than following God? What if his safety and comfort were more important? What if Joseph would have refused to help Jesus? After all Joseph didn't ask to be the father of Jesus. That calling just kind of fell into his lap.

The lesson is clear here. Our comfort shouldn't be a priority in our relationship with God. In fact God often calls us to venture out of our comfort zones and into a deeper relationship with Him. This story calls us to be willing to spring to action the moment God calls or sends an opportunity to minister our way. Some things we can't plan for.

I can't plan when a mother is going to call the church asking for help to keep the heat on in her home so her children can be warm. I can't plan when a family will need to stop by to pick up a bag of food from our food pantry. Every week we get calls for a helping hand and the love of Christ. More times than not God just drops these opportunities to minister in our laps and expects our love for Him to be enough to cause us to act. If God never asked us to take a chance and follow Him into unknown areas there would be no reason for faith.

Again God asks Joseph to step out in faith. God sends a dream saying the family can return to their homeland. Again there's no hesitation in following what God has called them to do. They immediately head back. I'm surprised that God gives them the all clear to return before all the danger is gone for Jesus. Herod's son is now king and this still presents danger to Jesus and the family.

Why would God send the family back into danger? Maybe the lesson isn't that God will keep us away from all danger, the lesson maybe just the opposite. Maybe we need to learn that danger is part of following Christ. There's danger in standing up for the

outcasts, for the immigrants, and poor of society. As Christians we must follow God regardless of the danger. The focus of this story isn't the danger. The story is really about the willingness of Joseph to follow God regardless of danger or the lack of comfort.

Another dream sends Joseph and the family to Galilee. Again the faithfulness of Joseph to follow is recorded. It must have been hard for the family to live in this state of upheaval. I've never been a refugee. I have never been an immigrant. I've never had to leave my home in order to survive. I've never lived in a war zone or faced a natural disaster that has stolen everything I owned and taken away my loved ones.

I have however been blessed to talk to refugees and immigrants and to help in small ways as they begin to put their lives back together in new homes. On January 12, we'll mark the one year anniversary of the Haiti earthquake. A year since so many lost their lives in the blink of an eye. A year since the whole world stopped and was reminded of the poverty and the lack of care we had all shown towards Haiti.

Before the earthquake Haiti was already the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Over 80 % of the population of Haiti lived in poverty. This great poverty was a leading cause in the amount of death and destruction the earthquake caused.

The quake hit on a Tuesday. The next night I sat with a room full of kids in our Christian Life Center and we talked about the quake and about the suffering that was taking place in a country less than 1250 miles away. Our children were heartbroken and we talked about ways we could help.

Our children did get to help. They made hygiene bags for Haiti immigrants who were coming to Atlanta for medical treatment. In March, I delivered the bags to my friend in Atlanta who works for a refugee organization. When I arrived she took me to meet some of the new immigrants. I wasn't prepared for what I saw.

I'll never forget meeting the children who were injured during the quake. I had never and I pray I never again see children suffering with that much pain. The mother of one of the little girls tenderly rubbed my hand over her daughter's head wound. During the quake falling debris had hit her daughter. I also meet a young girl who had been burned completely from the waist down. She showed me her burns. It was all I could do to keep from weeping.

They had been brought to America with nothing but the clothes they were wearing. They had nothing. They could not speak the language. They were completely alone except for each other. When they got the call to leave they did. Their lives and the lives of their children were on the line. They would have died without the proper medical treatment. In a blink of an eye the earthquake had forever changed their lives. I've

been thinking a lot about those immigrants in Atlanta recently. I can't help but see their faces as I think about Jesus and his family fleeing for their lives in the middle of the night.

The earthquake shook Haiti and the lives of all who lived there and it shook most of us from our own selfishness for a little while. In the days and weeks that followed countless people and organizations reached out to help the Haitian people. We sent money and our prayers to help the people who had lost everything. Many communities like ours welcomed immigrants from Haiti.

I wonder what kind of reception Jesus and his family received from the Egyptians. I'm sure some of them saw this new Hebrew family as a burden. Many of them may have said, "That new family is taking what belongs to us." If Joseph got a carpenter job, I'm sure the hometown Egyptian carpenters voiced outrage. It wasn't their responsibility to offer a helping hand to the Christ child. After all they didn't invite the new Hebrew family to come down. Hebrews did act and look different from Egyptians. I'm sure a few Egyptians were afraid of the new Hebrews. People are always afraid of newcomers, especially if they look and act different.

I'm sure there were some families in Egypt that welcomed Jesus and his family there with open arms and hearts. Some people are able to see past differences and see the similarities. Joseph and Mary were only trying to provide a better and safe life for their son Jesus. Any parent can relate to that. I hope that Jesus the immigrant was treated with respect, love, and compassion. I hope that his family was welcomed in and helped in their moment of need.

I'm sure that Mary and Joseph told Jesus about their time in Egypt as he grew up. They may have shared with him the names and stories of the people who showed them love and compassion while they were refugees. I'm sure they shared with him the way they felt as outsiders in a new land.

Those stories and experiences must have made an impact on Jesus. He did grow up to be the man who loved everyone he met and provided for their physical and spiritual needs. Every ministry opportunity that fell in his lap was gladly met with love and compassion. May we as the followers of Jesus the immigrant do likewise. Amen.