

Our Savior the Refugee
Matthew 2.13-23
January 1, 2016
Christmas 1A
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St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Several years ago, my colleague Justin Joplin and I were working together in Richmond's Southside when we came to know a community of Bhutanese refugees living in an apartment complex just a couple of blocks behind the church we served. With the help of Patrick Braford, founder of a refugee resettlement organization, we got to know this group of newcomers and learned more about their immigration story.

They were Nepali by heritage, and many of them continued to be Nepali speakers instead of fully assimilating to the Bhutanese culture around them even though they were born in Bhutan. In fact, some of these families had lived in Bhutan longer than the United States has been a country. However, in the 1990s, they were all sent back to Nepal because of their language, their appearance, and their ethnic heritage even though they were born in Bhutan and knew nothing of Nepal.

When this mass deportation took place, well over 100,000 individuals sent out of Bhutan to Nepal, the Nepali government wasn't excited about their arrival. In fact, Nepal identified them all as Bhutanese and not Nepali as none had ever lived in Nepal. Thus began a life at the border of Nepal living in refugee camps waiting for news of their fate. By the time these friends made it to Richmond, Virginia, the majority of the group we met had been born in the refugee camps and knew very little of either Bhutan or Nepal. What they knew was waiting for instructions, waiting for news, waiting to be told what happened next.

Those coming to the United States were told of the tremendous wealth of this country, the ease with which they would find jobs, and the wonderful life awaiting them. They were promised a story of ease and a future of security by rumors and stories passed around the refugee camps. In reality, they were given 90 days of support from the U.S. government, and in that time were expected to obtain a job, a driver's license, housing, a bank account, and self-sufficiency. But healthy, strong,

25-year-old men and women had only known life in a refugee camp; a life of sitting with family and waiting for someone in authority to say what happened next. And Patrick Braford figured out that these lovely newcomers were spending their days all huddled into the apartment of the man considered the elder of their group, just as they would have before arriving.

The newcomers were handed a set of expectations and instructions but lacked many of the skills or language or personality traits necessary to make a life in the United States in a mere 90 days. To this day, Patrick works with the governmental refugee resettlement agencies to walk with these newcomers through their 90 days and then continue in relationship and partnership with them in the long months and years beyond for friendship, job training, cultural transitions, and fostering community among people who find themselves entirely without a sense of place and home. This is just one story among thousands...now millions...of displaced people around the world who flee, who are cast out, who are in danger, who are in need of home. And their stories matter to us today because their stories are written into our gospel.

Act One of the Christmas story is God being born into our world in human form, not as a prince to the powerful king and queen but in a position of little honor among animals and outsider shepherds, people widely distrusted as unscrupulous and dirty. God chooses this place of raw simplicity and these people of little influence and poor reputation as the setting and audience into which the Divine plan will be born.

Act Two is this same God born into human form fleeing the country of his birth because word has spread to the king that a child has been born who will one day threaten the king's power and influence. And so God born into human form becomes a refugee in Egypt, warned and protected by angels and hidden away across a foreign border until the time comes for him to return home.

These are the foundational stories of our gospel and become the lens through which we understand the stories of Christ. Somewhere between his birth and dedication at the temple and his adolescent years arguing and speaking with the rabbis, Jesus is hidden away and raised in Egypt for a time—days? months? years? Melissa Bane Sevier invites us to imagine what influential lessons those intervening years might hold. Consider along with her as she imagines for us, "that these early

life experiences, and the stories recounted by his parents, help to shape Jesus' later ministry to the people on the margins – those who are set aside or who by illness or race are ostracized. [As an adult, w]e see him warmly accepting people from other places, religions, and races. He eats with them, laughs with them, and welcomes the outsider. This is true incarnation."¹

In the infant Christ we have an image of the eternal God. It's a remarkable statement of our faith, and the opening stories of the gospels necessarily link us back to the opening stories of scripture found in Genesis as the gospel writers invite us to remember the image of God imprinted in each one of us. Jesus is now showing us what that image, the *imago dei*, looks like when it has flesh. When we are giving our lives to the way of God, we see in the gospel stories what that will look like. We see and hear the ways of love. We see and hear the priorities of God. We see and hear the ways that must shape our lives.

My favorite description of the concept of incarnation comes from St. Athanasius writing in the 4th century about the God who takes human form. The image of God in humankind had become tarnished and damaged in desperate need of being refreshed and renewed, Athanasius explains. Of course, "You know what happens when a portrait that has been painted on a panel becomes obliterated through external stains. The artist does' not throw away the panel, but the subject of the portrait has to come and sit for it again, and then the likeness is re-drawn on the same material. Even so was it with the All-holy Son of God. He, the Image of the Father, came and dwelt in our midst, in order that He might renew mankind made after Himself."²

It's a beautiful metaphor, Christ sitting for the original portrait of humanity again that we might know what the image of God within us looks like. And so we ask of these Christmas narratives: what is the portrait of God in this story? How is it different from the stories we tell ourselves about this faith? How does the portrait of God match the portrait of our lives? What do we do with the false stories that simply aren't in line with the gospel as we hold it? What do we do with the false

¹ <https://melissabanesevier.wordpress.com/2016/12/26/jesus-the-refugee/>

² St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*

stories of our lives that simply aren't in line with the promise that God's image is deep within us?

So many questions to consider as we study the foundational gospel narratives of Jesus' birth and earliest years. What does it mean for the gospel to begin with God born into human form becoming intimately familiar with those who struggle, those who suffer, those who are cast out, those who wait, those who are afraid, those who have very little power and even less influence? And what does it mean, on this eighth day of the Christmas season and the first day of a brand-new year, for us to align our lives rightly with this God born into human form?

When the gospel tells us, "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it," the gospel then immediately gives us some darkness to put that light into context. Incarnation—God with us in the flesh—means God present in the very worst and not just the best. And where does God go and what does God show us in these very first years of a divinely human life? Not throne rooms but margins. A holy family on the run. An infant life unsafe and threatened by the powerful king. Our tradition tells us that the life of Christ is good news—God with us. What is good in this portrait before us?

The good news is that God is not distant and unable to connect with our complex and layered world. Instead, God is intimately present to us in our darkness because God is intimately familiar with the darkness of this world. There is no need for us to hide our brokenness from God or from each other. This is good news because we are freed from shame and invited into vulnerability and truth-telling. God in Christ welcomes all just exactly as they are, and that includes us. You are welcome in the presence of God.

The good news is that the path of God isn't always straight. In fact, according to the early narratives of Jesus' life, the path of God is particularly crooked before it's ever straight, and sometimes everything looks dark and foreign and strange before any light and love shines. This is particularly good news as we look ahead at a new year with equal parts hope and uncertainty. For many of us, those actually aren't equal parts—there's considerable uncertainty as we look around our world and imagine what the next twelve months will bring. Perhaps the gospel reading offers us a glimmer of hope as we affirm God present to us and with us and then God hidden

deeply within the landscape of oppression and suffering. God is in the darkness. God is moving and active even when the story is bleak. God is still Emmanuel, with us.

The good news is that God uses us to be intimately present to the darkness in our world, too, and to partner with God in the holy work of shining light everywhere we possibly can. You are invited to be present in the same ways God is present in Christ Jesus—paying attention to the margins, looking toward what goes unnoticed, seeing God in a strange land, among the forgotten and ignored. At St. Charles in 2017, this way of being present will invite us into the realities of prison and all of the complex realities surrounding the prison-industrial complex in this country. We'll continue exploring conversations around race and power. We'll move from praying for refugees in our world to taking actionable steps toward welcoming and being present in the lives of those who have been displaced by choice or force. We do this not because we desire to be political or because we are attempting to make of ourselves a political party. No, we love and welcome and work together in these ways because their stories are written into our gospel.

The good news is that you are welcome as a partner in God's work in this world. On this very first Sunday of a freshly born year, this invitation is how the gospel begins. God is already present and at work, even if hiddenly. Before you is an invitation to remember the image of God marked within you that you might also remember you are part of the story of making the crooked path straight not just in your own life but in our world. May you boldly step into the story in this new year. May you know the good news of God deep in your bones. May you embrace your part in God's story in ways you've never before imagined. May this year be one of gospel, incarnation, and rebirth for the church at St. Charles and Broadway. Lord, may it be so. Amen.