

God's Counter-Move
Matthew 2:13-23
Sermon by Dan Schrock
January 8, 2017

¹³Now after the Magi 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."¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

¹⁶When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸"A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

¹⁹When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰"Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead."²¹Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean." (NRSV)

For most Americans, Christmas ended two weeks ago. The holiday meals have been eaten, the presents have been opened, the carols have been sung, and most of the decorations have been taken down. For most people, Christmas is over.

We in this building are different. We who read the gospel of Matthew and call ourselves followers of Jesus know that Christmas is not over just yet, because there's still one part of the Christmas story left for us to read and reflect on. It's the part of the story that says what happened after the party ended.

The birth of Jesus was a party. All sorts of characters showed up to celebrate. A star arrived to shine in the sky above the village of Bethlehem. A heavenly choir flew in to sing alleluia. Shepherds—poor, scruffy, and smelly—shuffled in to kneel reverently. Magi—rich, elegant, and perfumed—showed up with rather expensive gifts.

The party also showered the new child with impressive titles. They called him a gift of the Holy Spirit (1:18, 20), a savior from sins (1:21), God-with-us (1:23), the king of the Jews (2:2), and Messiah (2:4). Five impressive titles for someone who needed a diaper change about every three hours.

Now the party is over and the visitors have left. The angelic choir went back to wherever angelic choirs come from. The shepherds returned to their hillsides and sheepfolds. The magi mounted up and slipped away as they had come, into the darkness of the night. The sheep and cattle, donkeys and camels—all gone.

Joseph and Mary and Jesus are now alone, just the three of them. They're ready for normalcy, ready to get on with the business of daily life: the carpentry, the meal preparation, the chats with neighbors, the small but sturdy acts of kindness that bind people together in community. Of course they're grateful for the fabulous party, but now they'd be happy to have an ordinary, satisfying life of raising this new child.

However, on the way to the party the Magi had committed a major blunder: they stopped by the palace and told Herod a new king had been born in his realm. Giving such politically explosive information to Herod was stupid, especially when they had a star to show them the way and needed no further directions. Why say such a thing to a megalomaniac?

As a consequence of the Magi's loose-lips, Herod is now trying to hunt the young Jesus down. Herod cannot tolerate political opposition. He wants complete control over the levers of power. Therefore to eliminate political opposition, Herod orders the army to march the six miles down to Bethlehem and kill all children up to age two. The Christmas story which began with such hope now becomes drenched in blood. Songs of praise now become tears of loss and lament.

Herod, a functional atheist, did not reckon with God, however. In response to Herod's move, God initiates a counter-move. The God of the Bible is no passive, two-bit deity who lounges in some far-off bar, slowly nursing a whiskey on the rocks. No. The God of the Bible is an active, hands-on, and deeply engaged Presence who is as close as your very breath. This God is intimately concerned with the affairs of earth. This God continually looks for small counter-moves to thwart the machinations of evil.

In this case God's small counter-move is to give Joseph a dream one night. The dream's message is blunt and urgent: Get out of Bethlehem now, because the army is marching toward you. Pack your things and flee to another country.

At that moment Jesus, Mary, and Joseph became refugees for the same reason millions of people in our world become refugees to this day: to escape violence. It generally takes a dire reason for people to leave their home, community, and land. Often that dire reason for fleeing down the road is to avoid getting shot or bombed.

My own ancestors became refugees when they fled Switzerland and came to the United States. So far as I know, their motives were mixed: they wanted relief from heavy taxes, they wanted freedom from religious discrimination—and let's just say it honestly—they wanted fertile farmland. Many of us are descended from refugees who came to the U.S. for similar reasons.

This final installment in the Bible's Christmas story suggests that God sometimes urges vulnerable people to become refugees. In some cases, the movement of refugees across the globe represents the saving action of God. If the world were perfect, God would not need to urge people to become refugees, because justice and peace would be plentiful in every land. But we don't live in a

perfect world, and so in some contexts urging people to become refugees may be the best God can do.

God relies on people of faith and good will to help refugees. We can easily imagine that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus received help from fellow Jews as they fled the land of Judah, and that when they arrived in Egypt, they received more help from some of the Egyptians. Though I don't know many details, I think the Dutch Mennonites helped some of my Swiss ancestors get to the U.S.

The Christmas story ends with a gentle summons to compassion and service. How might we join God in responding to human need? What assistance could we provide to people who flee violence, persecution, and poverty? What small counter-move has God made that we can support?