

1 Christmas	January 1, 2017	St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Franklin, TN
Hebrews 2:10-18;	Matthew 2:13-23	Katherine Museus

Did anyone else find the experience we just shared kind of...jarring? Together we sang joyfully, "Love has come a light in the darkness! Love shines forth in the Bethlehem skies..." and then I read you a story about what happened to that love. That love was a child under two years old, already marked for assassination by the king. That child and his family had to run for their lives, away from home, away from family and friends and any kind of support system, away from mother tongue and familiar customs and religion, and settle in another country. Behind them, back at home, that king ordered the murder of babies, just because they could have been Jesus. When the king dies, the family returns to their home country, but they are still terrified to return to their hometown in case the new king is after them, too. So they rebuild their lives in another region, Galilee.

"Love has come and never will leave us! Love is life everlasting and free..."<sup>1</sup>

We would hope that when "Love has Come," the whole world would react like the shepherds in Luke's story of Jesus's birth: staring in wonder, praising God, overflowing with joy and hope and goodwill (Luke 2:8-20). We would hope that when "Love has Come," the whole world would change.

Instead what we see in Matthew's Gospel is that love incarnate, the baby Jesus, thrown immediately into some of the hardest of human experiences. Like today's reading from Hebrews said, "he...[became] like his brothers and sisters in every respect." He (or at least his parents) even felt that feeling of being "held in slavery by fear of death" — not just "we are all going to die one day" fear, but a real and present fear that violence could have been waiting for them every time they opened their door.<sup>2</sup> That little baby and his parents became refugees — an experience shared by 1 in 122 people alive today.<sup>3</sup>

A Somali-British poet wrote a haunting poem describing what drives refugees like Mary, Joseph and Jesus (and like those we see on the news) to run so far away from home. It begins:

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<sup>1</sup> "Love has Come," Ken Bible (text), copyright 1996: Integrity's Hosanna! Music. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #292.

<sup>2</sup> Matt Skinner on *Sermon Brainwave* (podcast), "SB518 – First Sunday of Christmas, January 1, 2017," Working Preacher.

[http://www.workingpreacher.org/?lect\\_date=01/01/2017&lectionary=rcl](http://www.workingpreacher.org/?lect_date=01/01/2017&lectionary=rcl)

<sup>3</sup> "Worldwide displacement hits all-time high as war and persecution increase," The UN Refugee Agency, June 18, 2015. <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2015/6/558193896/worldwide-displacement-hits-all-time-high-war-persecution-increase.html>

no one leaves home unless  
home is the mouth of a shark  
you only run for the border  
when you see the whole city running as well<sup>4</sup>

your neighbors running faster than you  
breath bloody in their throats  
the boy you went to school with  
who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory  
is holding a gun bigger than his body  
you only leave home  
when home won't let you stay.

The poem goes on to describe fleeing in boats and in trucks and under fences, the violence along the journey, life in a refugee camp (waiting, waiting, waiting to go somewhere else, sometimes for years), finally going to a new land and being met with confusion and insults and hatred. The poem ends:

i want to go home.  
but home is the mouth of a shark  
home is the barrel of the gun  
and no one would leave home  
unless home chased you to the shore  
unless home told you  
to quicken your legs  
leave your clothes behind  
crawl through the desert  
wade through the oceans  
drown  
save  
be hunger  
beg  
forget pride  
your survival is more important

no one leaves home until home is a sweaty voice in your ear  
saying-  
leave.  
run away from me now  
i don't know what i've become  
but i know that anywhere  
is safer than here<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Warsan Shire, "Home." Read online: [www.seekershut.org/blog/2015/09/home-warsan-shire/](http://www.seekershut.org/blog/2015/09/home-warsan-shire/) or hear Shire read it: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=p50wrd2JiX4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p50wrd2JiX4)

On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day we celebrated that God took on human flesh and blood and was born into our world as a child. We celebrated that love has come.

Today, on the First Sunday of Christmas, the Gospel of Matthew reminds us what that means. Love has come. But it is not the haughty love-from-above that an earthly ruler might claim to have for his people; it is not a fairy tale love that wipes away reality. It is the love that is willing to live the most difficult of lives, the love that runs toward suffering. It is the love of a God who lived a human life not in power and glory but replete with pain and fear and insults and hunger. Love has come, and it became one of the people that others would look at sideways and wonder “Where did *he* come from?” Love became the baby of an unwed mother; a refugee and an immigrant; a vagabond; love became a friend to the outcast, the sick, and the sinner; love became a prisoner, an executed man.

(And if we are wondering where God is in our world today, there are some good starting points.)

This passage from Matthew is not only a tale of hardship and violence, of God and God’s people suffering; it is also a story of how God is at work even in those most painful of times. In this story we read that at the same time that God was a child held in his mother’s arms as they ran from danger, God was also giving Joseph wisdom to lead his family to safer places. And we can imagine God at work among any kind strangers who helped the holy family on their way to Egypt; we can imagine God at work through neighbors who helped the family make a home in a new land. Later Jesus would continue God’s embodied work as he healed, forgave, taught, and saved.

God’s work continues today.

When we look for God among the immigrants and refugees of today, we can still see God there.

A few years ago I was the youth minister at Christ Lutheran Church in south Nashville, which is closely connected with a number of immigrant and refugee communities. My Sunday school class was made up mostly of children who had grown up in the war-torn Congo and refugee camps in Tanzania. We were preparing to baptize three young African boys who had just been relocated to Nashville, and Pastor Morgan Gordy mentioned in passing that she didn’t know where their family was going to keep their baptismal certificates.

“I think I’m going to have to get them some frames,” Pastor Gordy said. “They hardly have any furniture. I don’t think they have a dresser with a drawer to keep them in.”

The man standing next to me immediately said, “Why didn’t you tell me they need furniture? I know all kinds of people looking to get rid of furniture! I can get them furniture!”

God works *for* refugees and immigrants: through those who help them to safety; through those who help meet basic needs of food and housing, clothing and furniture; through those who help them find jobs; through those who smile and help them to feel welcome.

God also works *through* refugees and immigrants: through the skills they offer to their new community; through the help they provide to their neighbors; through the jobs they create in the businesses they start.<sup>5</sup>

And God works in so many other difficult situations, as many us have experienced first-hand: God is there when we are grieving; God is there in hospital rooms; God is in the jails and prisons; God is on the streets; God is near us when we are lonely or depressed.

There is nowhere we can go where God will not be. There is nothing we will go through that God won't go through with us.

Today's gospel story easily comes off as bleak and even horrifying. But it also reminds us: even in the darkest of stories the gospel truth rings out: Emmanuel. God is with us.

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<sup>5</sup> Immigrants are 30% more likely than U.S.-born citizens to start new businesses, according to Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services. See "Immigration Myths Busted" at [lirs.org/mythbusters](http://lirs.org/mythbusters)