

All Kinds of Refugees, All Kinds of Herods

By: Jon Heerboth

December 29, 2019. What is it like to be a refugee? God told Joseph in a dream to take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt to escape from Herod. What if they had found the border closed when they arrived? In his sermon today, Jon Heerboth tells us that the Herods of this world haven't changed over the millennia. And like Joseph, we must act to respond to God's plan.

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In my whole life, I never had a dream in which I woke up with the idea that I was told to take my family and flee in the middle of the night. But I do remember a night, in November of 1954 in Tokyo, when my father and mother snatched all three of us out of our beds and ran out into the night. The earth shook for a long time, and it shook hard. It was a terrible disaster for a lot of people there, but our parents kept us safely away from anything that might fall on us. To this day, I carry that fear with me in my head -- that the earthquake is the natural disaster that I most fear. When I look back on that it feels like a dream, but it wasn't. It really happened. Just to be sure, I checked before I related this event, because it was so powerful. A lot of people did die that night. But if I had some kind of warning in a dream, I wonder if I would heed it. If I was warned, would I have stayed home on the snowy morning a car slid into me on the way to work? I don't know. In 2005 I awoke in the middle of the night, zapped awake by a dream I couldn't remember, with the sure knowledge that I had to get up and decide to take a different job. And I saw that as some kind of direction and I took it.

Most of us can think of times when a warning would be a great help. We'd love a warning that our slight pain isn't really indigestion, but something needing immediate action. It may be trivial, but I would like a warning as simple as some foreknowledge of a failing car battery. I would certainly pay attention to that. Unfortunately, that's just not how things usually work. As we go through life we make our choices, we pay attention to our instincts and our experiences, we profess our faith of course, and place our trust and hope in God. But most of the time, we are very much on our own.

In today's lesson Joseph received a very strong, very direct warning, and specific instructions about what he should do to keep his family safe. Joseph's dreams seemed much more intense than my own dreams are. An angel came to him in his dream and told him to flee, to clear out, to get away as quickly as the family could go. The angel also told him why: that Herod was looking for him and would kill him. Joseph got specific directions about where he should go, and that he should stay in Egypt until the angel told him otherwise. Now, if I had a dream that vivid, would I heed it? Would I take my family in the middle of night and head for the border? I would like to think so. But Joseph was tuned in and receptive to the angels' words, and he acted quickly to save his wife and her son Jesus. But safe arrival in Egypt didn't stop the violence back in Bethlehem. When Herod could not find Jesus he ordered his people to kill all the boys, two and younger, in and around Bethlehem. Many scholars believe Herod suffered from depression and paranoia. According to the historian Josephus, Herod killed his favorite wife, his brother-in-law, three of his sons, 300 of his top military officers, and many others. Herod was so brutal and killed so many people that the murder of the children around Bethlehem seemed trivial, and is not even recorded in history. Herod was a violent man and would not ignore the baby the Magi came to honor as a king. He would have been enraged when he discovered that the Magi dismissed his order to come back and report to him. So, he took action himself to protect his power and his throne.

Matthew's story of the flight to Egypt reminds us of when Pharaoh ordered the death of male Hebrew infants in Exodus 1. Pharaoh ordered the midwives to kill boy babies, and when that didn't work he

ordered the Egyptians to throw the Israelite boys into the Nile. In today's gospel lesson, righteous Judeans must flee to Egypt to escape Herod's massacre in their own land. People like Herod and the pharaohs before him were powerful rulers who destroyed anyone they saw as a threat to their power. Walter Brueggemann, the noted Bible scholar and former professor at Eden Seminary, wrote about attempts to figure out which pharaoh might have been responsible for murdering the Hebrew babies in the Exodus story. He finally determined that it didn't matter which one. He wrote, "When you've seen one pharaoh, you've seen them all. They all act the same way in their greedy, uncaring, violent, self-sufficiency." Herod was that kind of man too, and he was out to get Jesus. God acted through Joseph to save the child from certain death, so that God's plan could move toward fulfillment. Jesus was in danger, God spoke to Joseph through an angel, and Joseph took action.

The Herods and the Pharaohs of this world haven't changed over the millennia. They continue in their greed, their lack of care for people around them, and their instinct to oppress and even to kill. Their only concern would be to quash any threat to their power. In the gospel for today, God's command was, "Flee to Egypt." What do you see in your mind's eye when you hear that command? I can picture Joseph snatching Jesus from sleep and telling Mary to quickly gather their things. I see them fleeing through the darkness of night, looking over their shoulders to be certain they were not followed. With each moment, they were a little farther from the known and the familiar, and closer to a land they did not know. Their one thought, their only priority, would be to protect their child and keep him safe.

I hear this story in a new way these days. This is a time of mass migration around the world. Large numbers of people are subject to persecution for their race or ethnicity, their nationality, their opposition to a ruler, their religion or sect, or their perceived difference. In some places people are on the run from war. In others, from murderous gangs. Many endure poverty. If we believe the news stories, the slaughter of the innocents continues around the world today with no let-up. People risk everything to flee to their Egypts, to what they hope will be someplace in which they can live safely and find people who will welcome and accept them.

What if Joseph had found the border to Egypt closed when they arrived? What if the border was blocked by a wall, or if they had been turned back? What story would we be telling today? What if guards had taken the two-year-old Jesus from his family and placed Mary and Joseph in prison? Would there be any good news for you or me, for the refugees of the world? You may remember the tragic photograph of a two-year-old child and her father after they drowned in the Rio Grande last summer. They were fleeing El Salvador for safety and economic opportunity. When they arrived at the US border and asked for asylum, they were turned away because of a policy called metering. They decided to try to make it across the Rio Grande, bypassing the ports of entry. First, the father carried the child across and set her on the bank. When he returned to help his wife, the little girl threw herself in the water. Her father tried to rescue her but they both drowned in the river. I can feel the parents' fear for their child's safety, and their panic when she threw herself in the river. We can all feel the mother's desolation at the death of her husband and daughter Valeria, just like the timeless verse from Jeremiah in today's lesson: "Rachel weeping for her children, she refused to be consoled because they are no more." This story was in the news for a week or so. Mainly, I suspect, because of the strikingly sad photograph of the drowned refugees. The victims and the grieving mother have faded from the news and from our memories. They are just one story in the endless stream of refugees that pass briefly across our awareness.

I cannot explain why the child Jesus found refuge and the children of Bethlehem did not. I don't know why one child is safe and another drowns in a river, or is lost from a raft at sea, only to be quickly forgotten. Matthew made it clear that the murder of the children was not the will of God. It was the

result of Herod protecting his power. It was not because God loved Jesus more than God loved a drowned refugee like Valeria. It is not because Jesus was God's son and Valeria was just another Salvadoran refugee. If that is what we think, then we have missed the point of Christmas. We would be denying that the word became flesh, human flesh, vulnerable flesh subject to murder or neglect from tyrants, just like Valeria's flesh and just like yours and like mine. The angel did warn Joseph though, and he took action and Jesus was saved from Herod's violence, and later saved again from Herod's successor Archelaus. Jesus wound up in Nazareth, a place so humble that no one would think of looking there for a king.

If you have ever left what was known and familiar to you, and traveled to the unknown and unfamiliar, if you ever knew your life was at risk and you had to make a change, or if your survival depended on crossing a border to a strange land, you know what it is like to be a refugee. Maybe your life has been disrupted and you needed a safe place to get away. Maybe you've known that it was no longer safe or good for you to stay where you were, or to stay the way you were. Perhaps you realized your life, your mental health, your economic welfare, or even your children were at risk. Some of us may be refugees from a miserable Christmastime, or fleeing from grief, sorrow, or fear of loss. If you've ever experienced these, or a thousand other experiences like these, then you know something of what it is like to be a refugee.

Herod was not just a king who lived 2,000 years ago. Herod lives on today. In every era, Herod has the power to corrupt, to abuse, to disrupt, to destroy. Herod is the one who will strike down any threat to the tyrant's power. Herod is the one who creates the refugees and then ignores them or persecutes them. Herod is the one who will turn the refugee away. There are all kinds of refugees, and all kinds of Herods.

I suspect that there are many people all over the world who have heard and responded to a nighttime call to flee their situations. There are two actions in today's gospel story: God delivers, but Joseph decides. That is the story of faith and our lives. Like the fragile holy family, our lives are held in the providential care of God. Deliverance is God's responsibility, not ours. Yet, like Joseph, we must decide how to respond to what we perceive to be the plan of God. We have to act. But that's seldom easy, and we will make wrong decisions. We will need to experience again and again in the Eucharist, the promise of God from the beginning. We decide, but God delivers. God, who was so determined to save us that God sent Jesus, God's very own son. Jesus was human flesh like us. Jesus suffered -- like all people suffer -- felt pain, hunger, and fear. God used Joseph to care for Jesus when he was helpless and vulnerable, so that he could live out his life and bring us to salvation.

So here we are on Sunday morning in God's house, our sanctuary, our Egypt. Here is where we are safe among our sisters and brothers. God talks to us here through God's word, just like God talked to Joseph through the angels. Here is where we gather as refugees before God's holy table, fed with the word and sacrament, reassured of God's salvation through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. When Joseph received direction from God, he followed the angels' instructions. We too are all God's children. We can't remain here in our sanctuary either. We must leave Egypt to return to our daily lives, with the strength to carry out God's plan for us. We pray for God's mercy and protection for everyone, and then we take action. We go into our communities to help feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and provide protection for the weak and vulnerable, so that God may work God's plan through us. God delivers, but we decide. We are the ones who must take action. Amen.

Let's pray again the prayer for the day: O Lord God, you know that we cannot place our trust in our own powers. As you protected the infant Jesus, so defend us and all the needy from harm in adversity,

through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit and God, now and forever. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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