

Jesus as a Refugee

Matthew 2:13-23

Mary Hinkle Shore

The Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Brevard, North Carolina

“Life has always been scary here,” observes Anne Lamott, reflecting on the human condition in light of shootings and terrorist attacks in the summer of 2016, “and we have always been as vulnerable as kittens.”¹ Given the vulnerability that is bound up with being human, it makes sense that the One known as Emmanuel, “God with us,” would know human vulnerability. Sooner or later, Emmanuel would come under threat. Even so, the speed with which mortal danger finds him is remarkable. The baby Jesus is not out of diapers before he and his family are refugees fleeing state sanctioned violence with an urgency so intense that their flight cannot wait even until the morning.

Today, the refugee Jesus is joined by tens of millions of brothers and sisters. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates that at the end of 2015, there were 65.3 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, and 21.3 million of these were refugees. (Refugees are displaced people who have been forced to flee their own countries.) Nearly 34,000 people *each day* leave their homes because of conflict and persecution.² How shall Christians understand and respond to the highest levels of displacement in recorded human history?

For those seeking how Christians are called to engage with those fleeing their homes in search of safety, the stories in Matthew 2:13-23 offer a starting place. Engagement with scripture in Christian community shapes our collective imagination and action. To preach these refugee stories today is necessarily to engage the question of how to live faithfully in a time of mass displacement. That is the question of this essay. How will Christians who are not displaced live differently because of the shape these stories give to our lives? What responses do they inspire in those who follow Jesus, and what responses do they exclude?

Scripture Fulfilled

The opening chapters of Matthew are peppered with fulfillment citations and allusions to the Old Testament. The infancy stories of Jesus recapitulate the life of God and the history of Israel as they had been intertwined from the time of the patriarchs through the exile. A short list of examples will make the point.

- Joseph, the presumed father of Jesus, receives divine direction through dreams—just like another Joseph. The patriarch Joseph had dreams and interpreted the dreams of others offering insight into the future. Moreover, like Joseph before him, Jesus’ life is saved as he is carried off to Egypt.
- Like baby Moses, baby Jesus comes under threat of death from a tyrant almost immediately (cf. Exodus 1:1-2:10). Also like Moses and the whole of Israel with him, Jesus is “called out of Egypt.” After leaving Egypt, the road “home” includes for Jesus—as it did for Israel before him—the experience of being a sojourner. The holy family settles in Nazareth not because it is home, but because it is more likely to be safer for them than a Judea ruled by Archelaus.

- The reference to Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew 1:23 connects Jesus to a prophetic tradition that has offered judgment and hope to Israel for centuries. Isaiah 7:14 offers King Ahaz hope for the near future and the assurance of “God with us” at a time when the help he may derive from human alliances is, well, limited. For Matthew, the birth of Jesus fills this word with new content and renewed hope.
- The voices and experiences of the exile help to shape our understanding of Jesus and the reality of those around him. As the innocents are slaughtered in and around Bethlehem, Matthew borrows Jeremiah’s description of the aching lament for all that had been lost as the Northern tribes went into exile. On the occasion of Herod’s vengeance, Rachel again weeps for her children, refusing to be comforted.

For those who seek to understand the contemporary experience of refugees through the lens of Matthew 2, J. R. Daniel Kirk’s explanation is helpful. Kirk surveys modern exegetical work on the fulfillment citations and offers his own alternative proposal. He concludes that Jesus fulfills the scriptures in the sense of filling them up.³ His image of a vase helps to explain. Jesus fills up the scriptures the way water fills a vase: the life of Jesus is given shape by the scriptures even as it gives that familiar shape new substance. As Kirk puts it, “Jesus did not simply come to embody principles or even fulfill prophetic predictions, but to take the story of Israel to himself, over the course of his life and ministry on earth, until such a time as the story of Jesus overflows the story of Israel and goes to all the earth” (28:16-20).⁴

As the story of Jesus overflows the story of Israel and pours out into all nations, it comes to give shape to the story of contemporary refugees, and their stories give the story of Jesus new substance. It is fulfilled in our hearing.

How is Matthew 2:13-23 fulfilled in our hearing? The Word is very near you. Ask refugees—or people who have had to run for their lives in the middle of the night—about their flight. Nyamal Tutdeal lives in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and is pursuing a Master’s degree in International Peace and Conflict Resolution. She was born in 1985 to parents who were refugees from Sudan’s civil war and who thought they would be living temporarily in Ethiopia. They stayed for six years. She remembers:

Then in 1991, our family was separated. While my mother stayed with my brother in Ethiopia, I joined my grandmother and uncle on a 107-mile walk back to Sudan. This was during the rainy season, when flooding was common. Most children my age were carried by their parents or other older relatives, but my uncle was sick during our journey and too weak to carry me. If the water got too deep for me to walk, I’d hold onto my grandmother and float behind her.⁵

Eventually the family, except for Nyamal’s father who was killed in the conflict, emigrated to the US. “The war ripped my family, me, and many others of my generation from our childhood, from our home country, and from our traditions. It stripped me of a culture and an identity.”⁶

The UNHCR reports, “Over half of the world’s forcibly displaced people are children.”⁷ Jesus and Nyamal currently have upwards of 32 million younger brothers and sisters.

Near the end of his life, the grown-up Jesus will tell a parable in which the Son of

Man separates people at the last judgment the way a shepherd separates sheep from goats (cf. Matthew 25:31-46). The people on his left are surprised to find out that when they neglected to provide food, drink, welcome, clothing, medical care, and visitation to the least of these, their Lord's brothers and sisters, they refused these things to him. Those on the right are equally surprised that their attention to the least of these was always also care for their Lord. This parable, with its sneak peek at the end of the story, gives readers of Matthew's gospel the advantage of knowing that even when we do not recognize the face of our Lord in another, service to others is in fact service to Christ.⁸ His story is recapitulated in the stories of all those who are fleeing tyranny and seeking safety.

Is God with Us, or Not?

Two different types of refugee stories are found in Matthew 2. In the first, Mary and Joseph flee with the baby by night. The story highlights the risks that the Holy One of Israel takes to be "God with us." When the baby and his parents are safe in Egypt, readers breathe a sigh of relief. Thanks to the angel's intervention, the holy family is delivered!

The second refugee story ends differently, with blood running in the streets, babies run through by soldiers' swords, and Rachel weeping, refusing to be comforted. After Jesus, Mary, and Joseph are safe, Matthew directs the gaze of readers back to the depth of sin that made their flight necessary in the first place. Herod is ruthless.⁹ The flight to Egypt demonstrates the solidarity of God with the human condition: like so many, Jesus and his family were threatened by tyrants and had to run for their lives. The slaughter in Bethlehem brings the problem of evil into focus: why was there no angel warning for the others? Why is Herod permitted to rule? Or Robert Mugabe or Bashar al-Assad?

As the current refugee crisis has neared and then surpassed the scale of the mass displacement associated with WWII, stories of Jewish refugees denied asylum in the 1930s and 1940s are being remembered. In 1939, for instance, the *SS St. Louis* set sail from Hamburg with more than 900 Jews on board. Although passengers had visas for Cuba, the ship was not allowed to dock in Havana, nor later in Florida. It was sent back across the Atlantic. Eventually, passengers found temporary refuge in Belgium, France, Holland, and the UK, where many would again be at risk when Hitler's troops rolled through western Europe. In the end, 254 of the ship's passengers, all of whom had been turned away when they sought refuge in Cuba and America, were killed by the Nazis.¹⁰ In the summer of 1942, hundreds more Jewish refugees were refused entry into the US because one passenger on their ship admitted to being a German spy.¹¹ Today, reports from Australia,¹² Turkey,¹³ and America¹⁴ tell of refugees and immigrants victimized or killed after having arrived in countries they thought would be safe—to say nothing of those who never made it even to relative safety!

Evil and the Response of Those in Christ

How shall we understand stories of innocents slaughtered? Is it fair that Jesus is saved and others are not? How can we rejoice that Mary is spared the loss of a child while other mothers, then and now, receive no such mercy?

John Swinton argues that the power of evil is its power to isolate its victims from the love of God and the love of other human beings. "The *real* problem of evil is not

simply that evil and suffering exist, but rather its ability to separate suffering human beings from the only true source of healing and hope: knowledge of the love of God and a sense of providential meaning and hope. Evil is that which destroys hope in and love for God.”¹⁵ Stories of children murdered by soldiers threaten to move us to despair. How does a world where this happens make sense? Such an event—whether it happens in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus or in Syria¹⁶ today—unravels what Christians think we know of God’s character, mercy, and justice.

As we read Matthew 2:13-23, two responses to the question of God’s presence and God’s justice in the face of evil present themselves to us. The first is seen in the biography of Jesus, the second in the actions of the body of Christ as it exists throughout time and space.

The slaughter of the innocents forces us to hold the events of Christmas and Holy Week together, and when we do, we recognize how temporary is the stay of execution that the baby Jesus receives! Pam Fickenscher observes, “God’s salvation may seem far off and inadequate to the mothers who mourn, but the promise is deeper than this moment in time.... [W]hen this child of Rachel returns to Jerusalem as an adult, God enters into the fate of every doomed child and every bereft parent.”¹⁷ Soon enough, Emmanuel—God with us—will be forever a character in both refugee stories. In the end, the body of Christ will know the experience not only of the bodies of displaced persons who find refuge but also the bodies of those crushed by state sanctioned violence.

Beyond the confines of Jesus’ biography, the Holy Spirit shapes an ongoing response to evil by positioning the body of Christ alongside the bodies of those who suffer. By means of communal practices that resist evil and endure in the face of it, members of Christ’s body, the church, manifest our hope in and love for God. When we embody hope and love with and for refugees, for example, we give the lie to evil’s claim that the one who suffers is cut off from God, love, hope, and human community. By showing up, Christians embody for the neighbor what we say we believe: that God is just and merciful, loving the world so much that God would take the risk even of incarnation (which is, of course, “showing up” by another name).

In *Raging with Compassion*, John Swinton explores five ways that communities of Christians may be present in the face of evil: listening to silence, lament, forgiveness, thoughtfulness, and friendship. Each of these practices is worthy of study by Christians whose vocation is shaped by a worldwide refugee crisis. Two practices in particular connect to the responses to evil in Matthew 2:13-23. These are lament and friendship.

Rachel weeps. Rachel does not turn off the news or fall silent in fear or convince herself that in the current political climate nothing can be done. Rachel weeps. Writing in 2004, during the war between the US and Afghanistan, Frederick Niedner names lament as a practice that the world’s two billion Christians—who understand themselves to have died already in baptism—are uniquely able to join in with Rachel.

Only those already dead, or willing soon to die, can respond in a way that might give hope to Rachel’s children and to all others caught up in all this world’s whirlpools of violence and genocide.... Perhaps we can’t do anything about Bethlehem and Ramallah, Jerusalem and Gaza, Iraq and Sudan, even two billion of us who no longer need fear death because the

worst that can happen to us already has. But we can weep. We can join our voices with Rachel's.

Imagine the din. Someone would have to listen.

God would listen. We have God's promise. And maybe, just maybe, those who speak for God would listen, too.¹⁸

Some people—perhaps many along the way—provide friendship to the fleeing Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. On the way to Egypt, someone had to take them in. Strangers had to trust their word that the child's life was at stake. They had to provide the young family with food and drink, with blankets and a place to rest until they could cobble together a life in a completely foreign land. Later, when Mary and Joseph settled in Nazareth, they required more hospitality. They were separated from home, family, and livelihood. Neighbors had to trust Joseph enough to patronize his business. They had to welcome Mary, even though she spoke with an accent.

In his chapter on friendship, Swinton recounts the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46) and then comments:

Jesus is not simply *with* the poor and the oppressed; in a very real sense, he *is* the poor and the oppressed. He states quite clearly that such acts of charity and friendship towards strangers are in fact gestures of love towards Jesus. Indeed, one might even go so far as to suggest that such acts of friendship towards strangers are, in fact, acts of worship. They are worship in the sense that to minister to and value the sick, the poor, the hungry, and the victims of evil is to minister to and value Jesus. Showing hospitality is an act of love, worship, and devotion to God.¹⁹

At the end of 2015, Christians had at least 21.3 million opportunities to befriend the refugee, Jesus, and by doing so, practice their devotion to God.

“Perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18)

In present day America, as we consider how to respond to those who are running for their lives, fear threatens to cast out love. If Christians are to live as the body of Christ in the world, however, two responses in particular are excluded for us.

First, Christians who practice their faith cannot say, “Refugee resettlement is too dangerous. We feel bad for those people, but we cannot welcome them without putting our own lives on the line.” Whether the risk is as acute as it is portrayed is an open question. But even if our lives are put at risk by actions of love, when has the avoidance of danger ever been an acceptable reason for Christians not to follow Christ? Two more verses from Matthew are instructive on this point: “Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (10:38-39).

The second response that is excluded to practicing Christians is this: “The problem is too big. We cannot make a difference.” Joseph, having been warned in a dream that Herod sought his child's life, could not get every family out of harm's way. Perhaps he tried, and perhaps some neighbors joined them on the road to Egypt, but whether the gaps in the story are filled in that way or not, Matthew's account makes it clear that not all babies were saved. Here is the point: Herod's capacity for atrocity is no

excuse for Joseph to ignore the angel's message. Joseph and Mary get at least one baby to safety.

Likewise, those who see the face of the baby Jesus in the refugee's child must start somewhere. The number of refugees is staggering, and the atrocities are horrifying. Yet our inability to solve a global problem is not an excuse to ignore it altogether. We do what we can. We listen, lament, forgive, think, and befriend. These practices of standing with and for others are the best argument we can make for the claim that evil does not have the power to separate us or others from the perfect love of God. And perfect love, we know, casts out fear.

Notes

1. Anne Lamott, untitled Facebook post, July 15, 2016. URL: <https://www.facebook.com/AnneLamott/posts/894203970709247>. Accessed July 21, 2016.
2. "Figures at a Glance," on the UNHCR website. URL: <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>. Accessed August 1, 2016.
3. J. R. Daniel Kirk, "Conceptualising Fulfillment in Matthew," *Tyndale Bulletin* 59/1 (2008): 77-98.
4. Kirk, "Conceptualizing Fulfillment," 97.
5. Nyamal Tutdeal, "More than a Refugee," *Gather* 29/7 (September 2016): 10-12.
6. Ibid., 11.
7. "Children," UNHCR website. URL: <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/children-49c3646c1e8.html>. Accessed August 1, 2016.
8. Arland Hultgren, *The Parable of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 327. Hultgren makes that point from the parable that non-Christians can do service to Christ and "in the end Christ will acknowledge their service as well as that of Christians. What makes Christians different is that they are aware of the service to others as being service to Christ *ahead of time*" (emphasis mine).
9. While there is no first century evidence outside Mathew's gospel for the killing of children by Herod around Bethlehem, Herod the Great's reputation both for brutality and the ruthless guarding of his own power is well established by the first century Jewish historian, Josephus.
10. Mike Lanchin, "SS St. Louis: The Ship of Jewish Refugees Nobody Wanted," *BBC News Magazine*, 13 May 2014. URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27373131>. Accessed August 1, 2016.
11. Daniel Gross, "The U.S. Government Turned Away Thousands of Jewish Refugees, Fearing That They Were Nazi Spies," *Smithsonian.com*, November 18, 2015. URL: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/us-government-turned-away-thousands-jewish-refugees-fearing-they-were-nazi-spies-180957324/?no-ist>. Accessed August 1, 2016.
12. Elaine Wainwright, "Crossing Over; Taking Refuge: A Contrapuntal Reading," *Theological Studies* 70/1 (2014): 1-6, places Matthew 2 in counterpoint with the current treatment of refugees in Australia. It is available as a .pdf at <http://hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/view/2774/5070>. See also the more recent report, "Rights Groups: Australia Ignoring Abuse at Refugee Camps," *New York Times* (Aug 3, 2016). URL: http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2016/08/03/world/asia/ap-as-australia-asylum-seekers.html?_r=0. Accessed August 3, 2016.
13. Ceylon Yenginsu and Karam Shoumali, "11 Syrian Refugees Reported Killed by Turkish Border Guards," *New York Times*, June 19, 2016. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/20/world/middle-east/11-syrian-refugees-reported-killed-by-turkish-border-guards.html>. Accessed August 1, 2016.
14. Megan Julia and Julia Preston, "Delayed Care Faulted in Immigrants' Deaths at Detention Centers," *New York Times*, July 7, 2016. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/08/us/delayed-care-faulted-in-immigrants-deaths-at-detention-centers.html>. Accessed August 1, 2016.
15. John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 59.
16. UNICEF (<https://www.unicefusa.org/mission/emergencies/child-refugees/syria-crisis>) and #ChildrenofSyria (<http://childrenofsyria.info/>) provide regular updates on the needs within Syria and in the refugee camps on its borders. A paragraph from a February 2016 "Flash Report" offers these details about a two-week period in a conflict that is now in its fifth year: "UN High Commissioner for Human Rights released a statement pointing to shocking violations and abuses being committed on a daily basis. Reports also point to child casualties as a result of ongoing military operations, and at least

three health clinics destroyed. UNICEF is also concerned about separation of children from families as they flee the violence” (“Syria Crisis: Flash Update,” February 13, 2016. URL: <http://childrenofsyria.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/UNICEF-Flash-Update-Syria-Crisis-13Feb2016.pdf>, accessed August 1, 2016).

17. Pam Fickenscher, “Remembering Rachel: The Slaughter of the Innocents,” *Journey with Jesus* (for December 30, 2007). URL: <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20071224JJ.shtml>. Accessed July 14, 2016.

18. Frederick Niedner, “Rachel Weeping,” *Christian Century* 121/25 (December 14, 2004): 17.

19. Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*, 225.