

A Mother's Travel Guide to Egypt

May 10, 2020

The flight to Egypt by Joseph, Mary and Jesus, typically is read just after Christmas. But what better time than Mother's Day to bring back this story? "What?" you ask. We barely noticed the story last winter and it's springtime now. This story is long past.

But Mother's Day provides the perfect reason to look at it again. For it's mothers who saved the day, then, and now. Let me explain.

Let's review the reading again. Jesus was recently born. The shepherds returned to the fields. The wise men visited King Herod. Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus are settling in as a new family. All is seemingly idyllic. But trouble's a-brewing.

Herod worries about Jesus' power, even as an infant. If what the wise men tell him is true, this kid will upset his kingdom, depose him from power and challenge Rome itself. If he wants to keep his rule, he's got to eliminate the threat.

Fortunately, an angel comes to Joseph in a dream. He warns Joseph to take his new family to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod. In the meantime, Herod sends soldiers to root out any infant baby boys under the age of two. Not only is Herod set on destroying Jesus, but any other children who get in his way. It can't bode well for Joseph or Mary either.

They listen to the angel, pack up that night and begin the trek to Egypt. Note: this is not a casual walk. It's about 400 miles on the back of a donkey with your husband walking along side. Whether Mary recently recovered from childbirth or Jesus is a squirmy 2-year-old, the flight to Egypt represents great hardship. Let us not forget, Herod's agents look for them at every turn.

They make it! While in Egypt, they await news from home. An angel returns to Joseph, giving him the "All Clear." Well, maybe not all clear. If they go back, they'll find one of Herod's sons became ruler after his father's death. Unbelievably, he has a worse reputation than his father. The angel suggests returning to Nazareth instead of Bethlehem, just as the scriptures foretold.

Quite a story! Crisis, intrigue, a chase scene and eventual safety. In many ways, a typical immigrant story. Some sort of crisis erupts making life impossible in our original homeland. In order to literally "survive," a desperate move is the only way out.

Immigrants may not face retribution as did Jesus, but many begin their journeys escaping political persecution, violence from corrupt officials or drug cartels. My first college roommate hailed from Burlington, near Lake Geneva. She told me of her Russian heritage. Her grandmother came to the United States around 1920. She and her brother attempted an escape during the Bolshevik Revolution—her grandmother made it; her "great uncle" was shot dead.

Today, many Latin Americans report similar dire circumstances. A common story is extortion by drug cartels. Gang leaders seek out young teens to work for them. If they refuse, they either kill the teen or another family member as an incentive to cooperate. Many immigrants cite

stories of several family members tortured and/or killed while they are forced to watch. It's no wonder that many families attempt to send their kids out of the country for their very lives.

We have immigration stories of our own. My relatives on my father's side escaped starvation during the Irish potato crop failure in the 1840s. My German ancestors were not beer barons settling in Milwaukee. They were farmers unable to own the land they farmed for others. They set out for a new life in someplace called Kossuth in Manitowoc County. Think of the African Americans in the post-Civil War South. They too fled to the north to escape Jim Crow laws which made lynching a social event for many whites.

Herod lives on.

We migrate today for myriad reasons, many of them positive. Job offers have most of us picking up stakes to pursue a career elsewhere in the country, if not in the larger world. Snowbirds make the trek twice a year seeking better winter living. Retirement condos, hopefully with golf courses nearby, beckon us to downsize our family homes. Some even migrate to Nicaragua to live out their golden years in a tax-free haven.

Migration is part of human existence. God recognized that in Jesus' day and still today.

So mothers, what do we have to do with immigration? Well, there is that curious passage about Rachel in today's reading. Let's review:

“A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more.”

How did that get in there? Who was Rachel and why is she weeping? What or where is Ramah?

This is an Old Testament story about Rachel and her husband Jacob. Remember Jacob's ladder and his wrestling with the angel? He's the one. Rachel was one of his wives. In Old Testament times, having multiple wives was customary. Rachel was his first love, but through arranged marriages, she became the second wife.

Rachel and Jacob waited a long time to consummate their marriage. It took much longer for them to have children. Finally, they did. Joseph and Benjamin came into the world, but Rachel dies in childbirth. Her children, along with those of Jacob's other wives will become the 12 tribal leaders of Israel. Centuries later, as Israel is forced into exile in the fifth century BC, the nation remembers Rachel as their matriarch. She laments their forced march from their homeland, yet provides hope for their return. Ramah is their point of departure from their homeland.

Why is this poem tucked in the Flight to Egypt story? Rachel serves as a witness and beacon of hope to Israel. Her people become refugees in a foreign land. They have to adopt new ways of living, adjust to new people, make foreign lands their new home. Much as refugees today must

adapt to new worlds unfamiliar to them. Rachel mourned their loss and gave them hope of survival. In Matthew's gospel, he's transferring that image to Mary in her exile from Bethlehem.

As with Rachel and Mary, mothers around the world make the same witness today. In the United States, we have little experience with exile. Native Americans are one notable exception; their forcible removal from homelands to reservations still anguish us. But other countries experience this daily. And their mothers act much as did Rachel and Mary – witnessing their suffering, mourning their loss and steadfastly hoping for a better future.

Take for example, Latin America. During the 1970s, General Pinochet of Chile seized power after assassinating then President Allende. Pinochet purged the country of so called “undesirables”: professors, artists, social activists, unionists, etc. In all, about 30,000 people mysteriously disappeared in a matter of years. Think about it. Had this purge happened here, much of our church family would vanish.

Against all odds, mothers of the “disappeared” began to unite. Small groups of women petitioned the government to find the whereabouts of their missing children. The small groups grew, becoming more vocal. They demonstrated in public squares, identifying their cause by wearing white scarves symbolizing the diapers their innocent children wore in infancy. While they could not save their children, they did finally win recognition of the government's human rights violations. Almost 40 years later, their efforts are paying off for their grandchildren: social justice, corrected birth certificates, educational benefits for victims of dictatorship.

Rachel weeps for her children for they are no more.

Mothers in Mexico unite to find the lost university students in northern state of Guerrero. In 2014, 43 university students mysteriously disappeared on one night. It caused a huge national backlash, pointing toward police corruption and drug cartel activity. Mexico cannot account for over 26,000 persons reported missing since 2009, many of the victims being women. Since that time, mothers have organized others in their search for justice and teaching youth how to protect themselves from attacks. The United Nations now supports their efforts, pressuring the Mexican government to seriously investigate the victims.

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Today marks the culmination of a vigil for a young Mexican boy killed at the border between Mexico and the United States. We – Tina Bechtel, Judy Larmouth, Barbara McClure-Lukens and I – met his grandmother while attending the Border Issues Conference sponsored by Good Shepherd UCC Church in Sahuarita, Arizona last January. We had just gotten back from a side trip to Nogales, a border city between Arizona and Mexico. We wanted to see the murals painted on the Mexican side of the “wall.” We noticed a curious memorial to a young boy among the paintings. We took pictures, but really did not understand the significance of what we saw. Ironically, upon our return to the conference, while browsing through vendor tables, we found one with the boy's pictures and brochures. Not only did we find out the boy's identity, we met his grandmother raising awareness about his plight.

The story goes as follows: Almost eight years ago, Jose Antonio Elena Rodriguez, a 16-year-old, threw rocks at a U.S. border patrol guard. Jose stood on the Mexican side of the border; the

agent stood above him, watching from the U.S. side. As Jose turned back toward his house, the agent opened fire. Jose died after being shot to death; his body riddled by 10 bullets.

Jose's grandmother, a U.S. citizen, seeks justice for him. Two trials have occurred in which the border agent was found not guilty; the decisions were not unanimous – after five days of deliberation, one charge was “dropped.” The other was lost due to a hung jury. The family is now seeking damages for Jose's murder.

The U.S. Supreme Court recently turned the case back to a district court. But the U.S. Supreme Court has decided, following a U.S. Federal Court ruling that Jose's family must appeal yet again, now to a court in San Francisco, after the Supreme Court sided against a different family in an earlier similar shooting. If this sounds convoluted (and expensive), well, you get the point.

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Mothers throughout history have sought justice for their children. They mourn the exile of children through persecution, poverty and exploitation. Rather than lose hope, their mourning fosters acts of justice and restoration for those oppressed.

Even we at Union stand by our eternal quest for justice. The plaque on our front porch attests to harboring an escaped slave. We've cooked dinners for homeless people, we stock pantries for school children's snacks, we build homes for the poor among us. Just as we pray each week to God who is both “our Mother and our Father,” seeking justice knows no gender. When we exalt mothers, we exalt all those who work for mercy and justice. We need not have children of our own; our love for others transcends gender and family. We seek a world “as it is in Heaven.”

This year, our Mother's Day celebrations may not include dinner at a local restaurant. However we choose to celebrate, we hope and work toward justice for all.

Lou Ann Norsetter
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Matthew 2:13-23
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