

In the afterglow of Christmas, we are confronted with the trauma of suffering, death-threats, and persecution of the helpless and innocent. The Scripture reminds us into what kind of world Jesus came—a hostile world that did not want him, but tried to kill him. In the Gospel of Matthew, the holy family was forced to escape to Egypt to avoid death by King Herod. Isaiah the prophet gave a lament over adverse conditions faced by the Jewish exiles in Jerusalem. Then he recounts the many times Yahweh blessed the nation in past ages. Hebrews 2 tells us there was a good reason for Jesus' suffering: our salvation. Hebrews accentuates the point that Jesus identified with humanity by means of the incarnation. This Sunday seems to tell us that, like Jesus, we are born in a hostile and threatening world, but that God is with us and will use even suffering for our good. And God will protect us.

1. *“Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt”* (v. 13), said the angel of the Lord who appeared to Joseph in a dream. Is not running from a bad situation an act of cowardice? Why not take a stand, confront the enemy and fight it out? If Jesus is the Messiah, none other than the Son of God, why should he run from a worldly king? Does God not have legions of angels to protect his newborn Son? There is a time to escape and a time to take a stand. When Jesus was grown, friends urged him to flee from Herod who sought his life. But, Jesus refused to run and said, *“Go tell that fox, ‘I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.’”* In this case escaping to Egypt was the right thing to do. There was no way at that time to oppose Herod. But, there will come a day, a day to return to battle the enemy. In World War II, MacArthur had to escape from the Philippines only to return later to conquer.

2. *“Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him”* (v. 13), the angel said further. The king was determined to kill the baby Jesus. It tells us the kind of world a baby enters. It is a hostile world into which we are born, a world out to get us. Today a child faces “death” in terms of child pornography, child abuse by parents or other adults, possibly incest. It is a rough and tough world with tyrants, murderers, and molesters.

3. *“After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead’”* (v. 19). The holy family stayed in Egypt until Herod died. Rulers come and go, but God remains. Even though ruthless dictators straddle the earth, the day is coming when they are no more. Where are those who frightened and cursed the earth in the twentieth century—Hitler, Stalin or Mussolini? Things will get better eventually. Just as Joseph, Mary and Jesus were a refugee family escaping a violent dictator refugee families today are looking for a safe home.

A few days before Christmas, Jenny Yang wrote in *Christianity Today* about visiting a Syrian refugee family who was recently resettled through World Relief. “I went with friends and looked forward to getting to know the family and having our kids play together. When I opened the car door, the Syrian father, Nader, scooped up my one-year-old son, David, who started crying immediately. Feeling undeterred, Nader hugged him warmly, bounced him up and down, and went inside his home to get a toy bicycle for him to play with. In that moment, Nader endeared himself to my family and me—I’ve never seen an older man so comfortable and affectionate with a child not his own.

Nader is a Syrian political refugee who arrived in the United States in early September. He came with his wife, Ramya and their four children, all of whom gladly share toys with my son whenever we spend time together. (Their girls, in fact, often think David is a little doll whom they pick up and carry around, much to his initial horror, then delight.) The Kassab family's kind, calm exterior masks their inner turmoil and pain. They come from an area in Syria called Daara, known as the "cradle of the revolution"—the place where protests sparked the beginning of the Syrian uprising of 2011. After a water tank behind their house was bombed and part of their home was damaged, Nader and his family fled from Daara into Jordan. Although Syria used to be the second-largest host country to refugees, it's now the country that produces the largest number of refugees. It is, in fact, the crucible of the world's worst migration crisis.

Americans sometimes make generalizations about immigrants like the Kassabs. As someone who works for World Relief, (Jenny said) I see first-hand how negative stereotypes can affect refugees. A recently arrived Syrian refugee family told my colleagues that they received a phone call from their family members in Syria wondering if they were going to be deported back to the war zone. Another young Syrian refugee told us that his mom, still a refugee in Turkey, advised him not to go out of the house for fear that he would be harassed or arrested.

Refugees like these and many others often find themselves struggling to understand the language, put their kids in school, find a job, and set up medical appointments, all the while grieving the conflict that devastates their faraway homelands. The Kassabs, for example, take two of their children to the hospital every month for blood transfusions and live with the daily fear that their kids won't live long. (This health crisis is in part what drove them to seek refuge in Jordan and eventually in the United States.) They find community support from their fellow refugees and also get help from local church volunteers who take them to the hospital, teach them English, and offer other assistance. However, not all refugee families have access to this kind of help. Our World Relief Chicago office recently reported that only half of refugee arrivals in the area are assisted by a local church, and no doubt the same holds true for other regions. Although some of these refugees receive support from other organizations and individuals, nonetheless the gap remains, which means that churches have an amazing opportunity to sponsor refugees and share the love of Christ with them."

After Christmas the question is often asked "Was Santa good to you?" Then we tell of the many gifts received. This makes Christmas only a materialistically centered holiday. Should we not rather ask, "Was God good to you?" This would make us celebrate the spiritual gifts received at Christmas. In Matthew's Gospel we see how good God was to his Son and how good he is to us today.

Jenny Yang said, "This Christmas, as we experience the joy of buying gifts, baking cookies, and hosting holiday dinners, we might consider inviting our refugee neighbors to join us. Scripture invites us to practice *uncommon fellowship*, and what better way to celebrate the birth of Christ than by welcoming strangers into our midst?"

She concluded her article by saying, "I saw the Kassab family a few days ago and brought the kids a few Christmas gifts. They ripped through the wrapping paper as Nader and Ramya smiled and said, "Slow down, share." Before I left their home, Ramya offered me a hug, grabbed my hands, and gave them a tight squeeze. In freezing weather, she and her family stood in their slippers outside the house and waved goodbye as the kids ran after my car. In that moment, I was reminded that when I get to know refugee

families like theirs, I don't do it out of pity or guilt or charity. I do it simply because it's what Christ did for me. He welcomed me as an outsider into the fold of grace and declared that I am his, and I owe the same hospitality to others.”

As far as children are concerned the world has not changed in twenty centuries. From Herod's day to our day, children are victims of violence. Christian people need to be made aware of this growing problem and take steps to relieve their suffering as far as we possibly can.

Joseph proved to be a friend of the Christ child, and a servant of the Lord. What would have happened to the baby if Joseph had not been obedient to God? Here is a profound truth: God's protection, concern and compassion in this world is given through people like us. In today's world of cruelty and exploitation of children, God is still concerned about endangered little ones. He looks to his obedient servants to be friends of afflicted children everywhere. Amen.