

**Message for January 7, 2018**

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passage: Matthew 2:1-18

**Light in the darkness**

The story of the wise men coming to worship Jesus, the newborn king, carries more oomph than we usually give it credit for. We like the trappings – the star, the camels, the tall regal men in turbans and rich clothing, the lavish gifts. We've made it part of our lovely Christmas scene. But actually it's a story of political upheaval, of a new paradigm coming into being, of a radical shift in power. It throws everything wide open. This baby born is not to be contained, controlled or domesticated. He is a savior, yes, but not just of one country or one people, Israel. We're looking at a much bigger picture here. This baby is destined to be ruler and benefactor of the whole world.

These wise men from the East, from what is now Arabia, Iran and Iraq, somehow understand this. When they see the star they are compelled to follow. They come bringing substantial gifts. Because that's what is called for. This is a world-changing event after all. Surely everyone knows something big and important is happening, especially those in this country where the new king has been born. But when they get to Israel and ask for directions this doesn't seem to be the case. Their questions throw everyone into a tizzy. A king is born? What king? Where? Folks start scrambling to figure out what's going on.

The present ruler in Israel, King Herod, is especially perturbed. He goes into full defensive mode. For him, this is not good news. His power and position are being threatened. He puts everything on high alert, though very genteelly to start. He smarmily welcomes these foreign dignitaries, helps them find the information they need and then

sends them off with instructions to return because he, too, would like to worship this newborn king. Um-hum, riiight. All the while he is hatching an evil plot. This unsettling threat must be contained.

The wise men find the baby Jesus and his parents in Bethlehem. They are overjoyed. They see before them the light of the world, the light which has overcome the darkness! They kneel down and worship him. They give him the gifts they have brought – the gold, frankincense and myrrh, these treasures of great value. And then, being wise, they don't play into Herod's hand. They don't provide him with the information he craves. They go home by another road.

When Herod finds out, he is livid! And he responds with the ruthlessness brutality for which he is known. He sends his soldiers out to kill all the babies, two years and younger. Oh, can you imagine the outcry? My stomach twists. It breaks my heart. "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

This is the world into which Jesus was born. A world that did not receive him with hospitality. A world that brought terror down on innocent little ones and their families. A world of deep darkness. A darkness, unfortunately, that is still present in so many situations around our world today. Children at grave risk from bombs and drone strikes, from marauding gangs or militias, from famine, from ethnic cleansing and genocide, from megalomaniac leaders trying desperately to hold onto power. What choice do parents have but to flee if they can? Like Joseph and Mary with the baby Jesus, they leave their homes. With only what they can carry, they head toward safety, wherever that may be.

But will safety be found? Is there a place where they will be able to live in peace? Where their children won't be traumatized? Where they can let down their guard and just be a normal family again? What is it like to not know the answers to these questions? What is it like to have to flee?

After participating in a MCC Borderlands tour of Douglas, Arizona, and Agra Prieta, Mexico, Mathew Swora, pastor of Zion Mennonite Church in Canby, Oregon, reflected on the story of Mary, Joseph and Jesus' flight to Egypt. He reimagined the scene from the perspective of what he had seen at the US-Mexico border. His retelling of the story was printed in the December 2017 issue of The Mennonite magazine. I want to share it with you this morning as we think about what it means to be light in the darkness. Mathew writes:

Two thousand years ago, on a hot, dry, dusty day, at a checkpoint along the border of Egypt and Israel, some very bored, irritated and edgy soldiers sat around a table under the shade of a large tree. Any excitement they'd once felt about protecting their country had given way to weariness and the disillusionment of suspecting everyone, being lied to so often and having to crush the hopes of so many frightened, desperate people. To the checkpoint came a man and a woman. The man had a large knapsack on his back, while the woman was carrying a baby in her arms. They looked haggard, worn, dusty and frightened, and the baby was crying.

“Your purpose in coming here?” a soldier asked.

“We simply want to enter Egypt and live there for a while,” the man said.

“Your name?”

After writing their names on a piece of papyrus, the soldier then asked, “Your places of birth?”

“For my wife and me, Nazareth. For our baby, Bethlehem.”

“Bethlehem? Never heard of it.”

“It’s just a wide spot in the road near Jerusalem.”

“Your most recent address?” the soldier asked.

“An animal stall in Bethlehem,” the man said.

“You’re Hebrews, aren’t you?” the soldier said.

“Yes. How could you tell?”

“Just by your looks – and your funny accent.”

“That’s not a problem, is it?”

“I’m afraid so,” said the soldier. “We don’t let more than a few Hebrews into our country during any given year anymore. The last time we did, we had so many problems, what with plagues of flies and locusts, and lightning and hailstorms killing all our livestock, we finally had to round you guys up and send you back to where you came from.”

“That’s not exactly how we remember it,” the husband said. “You guys worked us so hard in the fields and making bricks. We were your slaves. But God liberated us and brought us out of Egypt; you didn’t deport us.”

“And I suppose you just swam the Red Sea to get out of Egypt?”

“No. God split it apart so we could cross on foot.”

“Riiight,” said the soldier. “Suit yourself. So if you want to get into Egypt, write your names on this papyrus. There’s quite a waiting list, as you can see. You’ll be

number 14,378, which means you'll get to appear before an immigration court in about, say, 17 years."

"Seventeen years?" the woman said. "I don't know that we have 17 minutes."

"Well, if you have verifiable cause to fear anyone, you can apply for asylum."

"Good," said the husband. "How do we apply for that?"

"You fill out this form, telling us who's persecuting or threatening you. Who are you afraid of, by the way?"

"King Herod. He sent his soldiers to kill our baby."

"Now why would King Herod even know about your baby, let alone want to kill him?" the soldier asked.

"Because," the mother said, "this is a very special baby, sent by God, to be king in Herod's place someday. He'll even be king of the world."

"Riiight," the soldier said. "But everyone can have enemies, so write your names on this list, and we can get you an asylum hearing in about six to 15 months."

"So now we can come into Egypt and await our hearing?" the father asked.

"Yes, but you should know this: Unless someone can post bail for you – and that's some pretty big bucks – you'll have to spend those months awaiting your asylum hearing in a detention center."

"By detention center, you mean prison, don't you?"

"Well, technically, OK, if you want to call it that, yes."

"I'm not taking my wife and our child into a prison."

"But we can't wait out here on this side of the border, with the chance that Herod's soldiers might still be looking for us," the baby's mother added. By then the

baby had stopped crying.

“Look,” the father said to the Egyptian soldier, “is there any other way we might enter Egypt and safety now, and legally?”

“There is another way,” the soldier said, “but I don’t think it applies to the likes of you, as poor and hard up as you look. You could get a visitor’s visa on the spot, but it will set you back 1000 denarii. And you’ll need to prove you’re worth at least another 10,000 denarii, so you won’t be begging in the streets or taking jobs away from us Egyptians. Like I said, I don’t think that’ll work for you, but –“

“Wait,” the man interrupted him. “Look at what I have here in this knapsack.” He slid it off his back and opened its top for the soldier to see.

“Whoa,” said the soldier as he looked inside the knapsack. “Where’d you get all that gold, frankincense and myrrh?”

“From some wise men who came from the east to worship our newborn baby,” the mother said.

“Riiight,” the soldier replied. “Still, where that money really comes from is none of my business. You’ve got enough wealth in that sack to bring our whole platoon in with visitors’ visas. Pay your money, sign this papyrus and welcome to Egypt, my friends.”

The man and woman signed the visa documents, paid the money and walked past the checkpoint into Egypt, looking and feeling relieved. But just a few paces down the road, they stopped, talked together and walked back to the checkpoint.

The surprised soldier asked them, “What’re you doing slumming around here for, when just up the road you can rent a chariot with two horses, hire a driver and go see the

pyramids of Giza, play the blackjack tables at Caesar's Palace in Alexandria or rent your own palace in the most exclusive neighborhood of Thebes? That's what I'd be doing if I had your kind of wealth."

"We're going to stay right here," the woman said, "and pay for more people's entry into Egypt, until all that's left is just what we need to live on."

"Which won't be much," her husband added, "because we can go live with my cousins in Alexandria's Hebrew community."

"Riiight," the soldier said. "This I'll have to see to believe. Suit yourself. Here come some more refugees right now. They look as ragged and scared as you did when you first came up to this joint. Are you going to help them?"

"If they need it, yes," the man said.

"But they don't look like your people, Hebrews," the soldier said. "By the looks of them, I'd say they were from Syria, Gaza or Yemen. That make any difference to you?"

And the woman said, "No."

[end of the story by Mathew Swora]

"The light shined in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." So begins the Gospel of John. Jesus came into a world that was not and often still is not hospitable. A cruel world. We see that in this story. But it is not what this story is ultimately about. It is instead a story about outsiders and foreigners sometimes understanding more than insiders and citizens do. It's a story about freely, generously sharing the wealth because that's what is called for. It's about hearing God's voice and

trusting God's leading, even when it isn't what you expected. It's about faithfulness in the midst of terror. It's about love beyond borders. It's about God dwelling with us, here and now, in our world, in our reality, bringing hope, being light that is in the midst of but never overcome by darkness.

Hold that light high, my sisters and brothers. You can trust it. Let it shine!

Amen.