

Mary: Following the Light through Fear

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12, *Common English Bible*

Have you noticed the weekly progression displayed on the worship table? At first the table was empty. Then the stable appeared. Next some cows wandered in. This was followed by Mary and Joseph along with some shepherds on the periphery. When we arrived on Christmas Eve, the angel and shepherds moved into the stable. We added baby Jesus after reading the story from Luke 2. Last week, nothing had changed on the table, but you may have noticed three men and three camels on the windowsills. Today the shepherds and sheep have returned to a far off field and the regal men and camels have moved into the stable.

This way of visualizing the Christmas story is likely a bit more accurate than the way we often see it. Nativity sets from other countries help expand our view of the people and events of the season.

Every year on Epiphany we recall the story from the beginning of Matthew 2.¹ But the traditional telling of this event doesn't match how the story reads. Who are these men? Not kings. They are magi, also referred to as wise men, seers, or astrologists. How many men are there? Matthew doesn't tell us. Our tradition assumes there are three, based on the number of gifts mentioned.

We do know that the magi are strangers. They are not Jews, they're from other nations somewhere east of Bethlehem. Their practices would have been considered foreign, even evil. In the Book of Acts they are considered some of the worst of the worst.² But these strangers play a prominent role in Matthew's story.

In the book *Expecting Emmanuel*, Joanna Harader invites us to think of the arrival of these men from Mary's point of view. *While the wise men are observing the night sky, traveling through the desert, talking to King Herod, and searching for the child*, Joanna writes, *Mary is in Bethlehem, caring for her son. She is changing his swaddling clothes, and then his regular clothes; nursing him, then slowly introducing solid food; picking up the stray nails left on the floor by her carpenter husband so that Jesus doesn't try to eat them.*

Joanna wonders *whether the arrival of the wise men felt like an interruption or an affirmation for Mary. Did she recognize the royal significance of the gifts they brought? Did she appreciate the gold, frankincense, and myrrh? Or did she sell them to buy more swaddling clothes?*

Mary knew that Jesus was a special child. She heard that from Gabriel, Elizabeth, the shepherds, Simeon, Anna, and now these three foreigners who showed up at her door. Was she thrilled to hear them refer to Jesus as "king of the Jews" or did these words terrify her? She knew the lengths to which kings would go to protect their positions of power. She knew that Herod, the current king over the Jews, was a tyrant and wouldn't react well to the suggestion from the magi that there was another king who posed a threat to him, even though that king was still a baby.

Joanna writes: *This visit from the wise men reminds Mary of all that is completely out of her control. And the story can remind us of the same thing. We cannot control the blessings that drop in*

¹ This sermon draws from Joanna Harader, *Expecting Emmanuel: Eight Women Who Prepared the Way*, Herald Press, 2022, pp. 113-118, 126-127, 135-139 163-164; Richard B. Gardner, *BCBC Matthew*, Herald Press, 1991, p. 55-57; and the Pulpit Fiction website, [Epiphany — Pulpit Fiction](#).

² See Acts 8:4-25, 13:4-12; 19:18-20.

unexpected. We cannot control the threats that lurk in the shadows. We can love and care for those God gives us to love and care for to the best of our ability, but we can't control how other people treat them – for good or for ill.

In this reminder of how little control we often have, we are also reminded that God is at work – through creation, through our dreams, through basic common sense. For all that we cannot control, we can rest in the power of God.

The hymn, *As with Gladness*, invites us to seek the God of grace, mercy, joy, and light in the same way these men of old sought Jesus.

Hymn: *As with Gladness, Voices Together 277*
Scripture: Matthew 2:13-18, *Common English Bible*

We rarely read the sinister parts of Matthew's account – King Herod's distress over hearing about this threat to his power, his ulterior motives in asking the magi to report back to him, the wise men's decision to ignore his instructions, and Herod's horrific decision to kill any possible threat to his position. This part of the story isn't conducive to Christmas pageants and beautiful artwork. These events are difficult to read, but they too are part of the nativity.

Listen to Joanna Harader's reflection on this story.

This is not the first time in Scripture we have seen a powerful ruler demand the murder of male children. All the way back in Exodus, Pharaoh feared the growing number of Hebrews and instructed his people to throw all the male Hebrew babies into the Nile River.³ The text quoted in [Matthew 2:18] is Jeremiah 31:15, which is set in the midst of the Babylonian exile. These children "that are no more" have been forcibly removed from their homes; the lamenting mothers have no idea whether their children are alive or dead.

These ancient mothers are kin to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina who mourned their "disappeared" children and demanded that the dictator return their children to them alive. They are kin to the Central American mothers riding a bus through Mexico today, searching for their children who have fled home because of violence and economic hardships.

These ancient mothers are kin to enslaved African mothers whose children were ripped from their arms and sold to strangers. They are kin to Indigenous mothers whose children were taken from them and sent to white schools, where many of them were abused and even killed. They are kin to Black and Indigenous mothers in the United States today, whose infants face unconscionable mortality rates, whose young adult children – particularly their sons -- are too often imprisoned unjustly.

In reading of the wailing mothers in Bethlehem, I think of all the mothers throughout the centuries who have joined Rachel's weeping and lamentation as their children have been threatened and killed because of the pride, anger, greed, and fear of those with power.

While Jesus survives Herod's death threats, he is not unaffected. His family is forced to flee their home, and he spends formative years of his childhood in a foreign land. Surely the tears of his mother mingle with the tears of those weeping for their children in Bethlehem and across the centuries.

Jesus himself enters the role of grieving mother when he laments over Jerusalem and asks, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings?"⁴ Later, as his crucifixion nears, he approaches the city of Jerusalem and weeps over it, lamenting the injustices its people inflict on others and the injustices they suffer themselves.⁵

³ Exodus 1:22

⁴ Luke 13:34

⁵ Luke 19:41

With their tears of anguish, all these weeping mothers across the centuries revealed the depth and power of their love. It is a love that carries children into exile and back again; it is a love that risks all to move threatened children to freedom and safety; it is a love that speaks up against individuals and systems that oppress their children.

This mothering love, carried by people of all genders and rooted in the essence of God, is a power beyond that of Pharaoh or Herod. It is a power that cares for the vulnerable and threatens unjust systems. This mothering love is the power that gathers us under the divine wings and holds us, and our all our beloveds, close to the heart of God.

What suffering causes your heart to wail? What injustices do you most lament? A song in our hymnal, based on the words found in Matthew and Jeremiah, invites us to consider those questions and the actions God may be calling us to take.

Hymn: A Voice Was Heard in Ramah, Voices Together 278
Scripture: Matthew 2:19-23, Common English Bible

Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were refugees. Imagine this part of the story from Mary's point of view. Joseph had received good and true counsel in his previous experience of an angel showing up in his dreams, so she must have had some confidence in the accuracy of this dream as well. She also was aware of the threat her son might pose to Herod and was willing to take whatever actions necessary to keep Jesus safe.

Quoting one last time from *Expecting Emmanuel* by Joanna Harader: *Yet even if Mary understands the necessity of leaving Bethlehem, how terrifying it must have been to abandon her home by night and travel with her young child into a foreign country. The journey was surely difficult, and I imagine there were many struggles as she worked to raise her child in Egypt. Whom did she ask for advice when he was sick or misbehaving? Whom could she ask to watch him for an afternoon when she desperately needed a nap? Whom did Jesus have play dates with? It can be difficult to find community in a foreign land.*

And how did she feel when Joseph told her that the angel said it was time to go back home? I suppose Mary had learned to listen when Joseph said, "An angel came to me in a dream last night." Still, there must have been some trepidation about returning to the place where the king had wanted her child killed.

At the beginning of Jesus' life, Mary is doing the always difficult work of mothering in particularly difficult circumstances. She bears the logistical emotional strain of moving away from home. She carries a deep fear for her child, knowing that very powerful people want to kill him. She helps Joseph with the physical labor of packing and endures the grueling travel – first to Egypt then to Nazareth.

Like Mary and Joseph, there are people around the world today who leave their homes because of threats to them and to their families. Like Jesus, there are children whose parents take them into another country in order to save their lives. Matthew didn't record the process by which the family entered Egypt and returned to their home country a few years later. It's possible that, like today, there were officials trying to enforce governmental regulations as they crossed the borders.

As we hear again the story of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, it's important to ask ourselves how we can offer hospitality and show compassion to families who have been uprooted from their homes and forced to leave their countries because of threats to them and their families.

One way to do this is to hear the stories of people who are refugees and immigrants – to learn about their situations. It's important for us to think of them as individuals, not as some anonymous group labeled as illegal. Some people who cross borders are criminals, but the vast majority are not. Some people who cross borders don't care about rules and regulations, but most

would like to go through proper channels. When this isn't possible, their fear and desperation force them to find other ways find safety.

People leave their homes for many reasons; forcibly removed from their houses and land; endangered by war, violence, and forced recruitment; threatened by drought and other natural disasters; or living under extreme economic pressures and lack of any way to make the money needed to survive.

We need to recognize that we play a part in some of those reasons, maybe not as individuals, but as citizens of this country and as consumers. Government policies concerning trade, the sale of weapons, and military involvement in other nations make it impossible for people to remain in their home countries. Added to this are multinational corporations who use and abuse land, resources, and cheap labor all around the world.

As we hear the stories and learn about the reasons people are leaving their homes, we can do what we can to influence those in power to make wise, compassionate decisions. We can also make better choices as consumers, perhaps buying fair-trade products and avoiding products from companies we know exploit workers and resources. Remember that last century's Irish, Italians, Germans, and Russians – our ancestors – are today's Syrians, Sudanese, Venezuelans, Afghans, and Ukrainians

Another way to show compassion and practice hospitality is to support organizations who are working to help refugees around the world and addressing the threats that are causing people to leave their homes. We support Mennonite Mission Network⁶ who is working with partners in Ecuador and other South American countries to assist refugees. Through My Coins Count, the Kansas Mennonite Relief Sale,⁷ and the collection of materials for school and relief kits, we support the work of Mennonite Central Committee.⁸ MCC responds to basic human needs and works for peace and justice around the world. We support – some of us have even volunteered with – Mennonite Disaster Service⁹ in their work of restoring homes lost through natural disasters. MDS is currently helping to build La Posada Providencia,¹⁰ a temporary shelter for people fleeing untenable situations in their home countries and asking for asylum in the United States. Other organizations some of us support include MEDA – Mennonite Economic Development Association¹¹ – and Heifer International,¹² who support small business solutions to poverty.

These are a few of the ways we can offer compassion and hope to parents, who like Mary and Joseph, fear for the lives of their children, who need practical help along with reminders of God's loving power.

Epiphany reminds us that Jesus – Emmanuel, God-with-us – came to bring hope to a suffering world. The hymn, *Jesus Entered Egypt*, reminds us of our calling to offer love and compassion to everyone, especially to those who are following the light through fear.

Hymn: *Jesus Entered Egypt*, Voices Together 279

⁶ [Mennonite Mission Network Home](#)

⁷ [Kansas Mennonite Relief Sale – A benefit for Mennonite Central Committee \(mccsale.org\)](#)

⁸ [Mennonite Central Committee U.S. | Relief, development and peace in the name of Christ \(mcc.org\)](#)

⁹ [Home | Mennonite Disaster Service - Respond. Rebuild. Restore. \(mds.org\)](#)

¹⁰ [La Posada Providencia \(lppshelter.org\)](#)

¹¹ [MEDA - Business Solutions to Poverty](#)

¹² [Ending Hunger and Poverty While Caring for the Earth | Heifer International](#)