

2 Christmas

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Red Sticker Places

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There is a faded red sticker on a window in my parents' house. It has been there for over 30 years, and despite its age and faded forgotten appearance, its meaning is still relevant. Back when I was in elementary school, the local community participated in an initiative intended to make a statement about valuing children by taking preventative measures to protect them from predators and child abduction while still providing ways for them to safely play outside. It was called Operation Red Ball, and with help from local police departments, families and businesses could apply for a round, red sticker to place on a window in their house. Children were taught in schools that this was a symbol of safety, and were told to look for those stickers in their neighborhoods and around town as they signified a place where they could go at any time if they were afraid or found themselves in an unsafe situation.

While no child ever knocked on my parents' door because they were afraid of a stranger; there have been plenty of times that house was a safe haven for children as well as adults in trouble, pain, or in need of a rest. In high school I had a friend whose step siblings bullied and hurt her so much, she spent a great deal of time with my family and me at my house where she was accepted for who she was and found a safe place to rest from the unhealthy and unhappy dynamics at her home. Lost tourists have knocked on my parents' door and found a place to rest and get the help they needed to find their way. My brother and sisters have also brought friends home who did not have a place to go for holidays like Thanksgiving or Christmas or New Years. My parents' home was and still is the preferred place for friends to celebrate without peer pressure to do things they were or are not ready to do. And as we grow older my brother and sisters and I still know that house with the faded red sticker is still a safe place for us whenever we need it.

While the program Operation Red Ball is no longer around, the need for safe places, especially safe places for children, still exists. And as we see in our Gospel, that need has always existed.

Believe it or not, today's Gospel reading is part of the church's celebration of Christmas. Only today we didn't hear angels sing songs of glory, we heard an angel give a message of warning. And we didn't hear about Mary treasuring events in her heart, we heard Joseph packed her and Jesus up to move because they were not safe. We did not hear of welcoming Jesus with awe and wonder, we heard of fear and a show of violent force by the powerful ruler Herod. You might remember that today we are in Matthew's Gospel and Matthew's telling of the Christmas story, the Incarnation, includes this often difficult to read story of the Holy Family fleeing to Egypt to escape Herod's fear and violent action of killing all children two years old and younger, often called the murder of the holy innocents.

Many scholars have tried to soothe any pain or anger we might feel when we read this section of Matthew's Gospel by telling us this story is simply Matthew's way of tying Jesus into Moses' story of liberation of the Israelites. As Moses escaped Pharaoh's order to kill all the Hebrew boys 2 years old and younger, so did Jesus. And as Moses came out of Egypt, so did Jesus.

And while I certainly value the contributions of those scholars, I wonder if there is more to it. Maybe Matthew is saying something about the world the Incarnate God came into and what it means that God became God with us.

Matthew's Gospel reminds us, as does Luke's Gospel, that Jesus was not born into a peaceful world, he was born in a world of fear of power and violence. Where people were at the mercy of rulers who it seems were able to make decisions that were in their own interest, and not in the interest of anyone else. We see the world Jesus was born into was a world where the people who paid the ultimate price for one man's fear of losing his power and wealth and prestige were children. Children who were not able to fight back. Their parents didn't seem to have the ability nor the power to fight back either. Matthew's Gospel for today reminds us of deep grief caused by injustice and loss and of the need for places where people are safe to grieve, to heal, to learn, and grow after or because of such tragedies.

There is also a lot of movement in this Gospel, movement caused by an angel's message to go to a place that will be safe for Jesus. Which makes Jesus, Mary and Joseph refugees who left their home in order to find such a place. We've heard a lot about refugees lately. It seems to me most of what we've heard is political; countries fearing to take in the refugees because of potential

negative economic, social, or religious impact that might result from an influx of outsiders. However our Gospel today reminds us every refugee has a story, a story that connects any of us who have moved from one place to another, not only to each other, but also connects us to God.

One news channel has been following certain Syrian refugees and sharing their stories. One story that caught my attention was the story of a teenage girl named Noujan Mustaffa, who left the frightening violence of Syria with her sister and a family friend. Noujan suffers from cerebral palsy, and because she was not physically able to walk the refugee route, had to be pushed the entire way in a wheelchair. Slowly, facing difficulties and challenges, including being forced into refugee camps, Noujan and her sister finally made it to Cologne, in Germany, where, thanks to the support and help from her family and kind strangers, she is now living a life she could not have known had she stayed in her home county. She is delighted to do things we not only take for granted, but sometimes even complain about. For instance, she loves going to school every day, something I hear very few teenagers say. She is receiving medical treatment and physical therapy and has something she did not have before: hope. Hope she might walk again. Hope for her future. Hope that one day she will be reunited with her parents who are still in a refugee camp in Turkey.

What might impress us most about Noujan is that she initiated the difficult and often discouraging flight from her home herself. She knew her life didn't stand a chance if she stayed where she was, she knew she needed to go to a safe place: a place where she could go to school, receive medical treatment, where fear of violence wasn't the daily norm. Her story is full of grief, loss, sorrows, opportunities, healing, learning, and even happiness; and although it is far from over, might not be too different from our own lives. There are times we all have difficulties, tragedies, situations that we need to overcome as well as moments of wonder, beauty, happy reunions, and hope for a better tomorrow. Sometimes the thing that helps us through those rough times the most, is those places where we can go where we are safe from harm; where we can heal, learn, and rest. For Noujan it is Cologne; for Jesus, Joseph and Mary it was Egypt, for others that place might be different, but no matter what it looks like, that place that is free from violence and oppression is as much needed today for children, refugees of all kinds, and for all of us children of God.

Our Gospel today reminds of something else: that acts of injustice and violence that create pain, loss, and deep grief like Herod's massacre or mass shootings, or other acts of violence, are not caused by God. They are caused by fear and anger and greed. Such actions do not give God pleasure; God came in Christ to show us another way to live, and at the very same time be with us in every moment of life. In his life Jesus knew what it was to move around, to lose someone he cared about, to be rejected, to be hurt, and worse. His response wasn't to destroy the violent with acts of violence, but to grieve and heal and bring healing, to be loved by God and bring love, and to die and rise to show us a new kind of life that doesn't ever have to fear death. There were other times when Jesus retreated to safe places: a house of friends or a quiet place of prayer. Those places that were not necessarily marked by round, faded red stickers, but were marked by God's love. Places where Jesus didn't stay forever, but provided what he needed to do the work of Incarnation, showing how God is present with us in our lives.

As we enter the last days of the Christmas season and the first days of 2016, we might let today's Gospel give us the opportunity to reflect on places of God's Presence and Love: places where we can go to grieve, or heal, learn, or listen, or be listened to and where we might be challenged to be the love we have received, to go out and bring God's love to a world where there still is pain and sorrow, injustice, acts of violence where children and the powerless pay the price for another's fear or anger or greed. In a world that can seem overwhelming at times, being and offering the renewing, healing, hopeful love of God, whether shown in offering a place of refuge, a meal, a prayer shawl, a listening ear, a loving challenge, or however you feel called to help another experience God's presence, can make a positive difference in the life of a person and the world.