

"THE GEOGRAPHY OF JESUS: BETHLEHEM TO EGYPT"

Matthew 2:1-23

December 29, 2019 First Sunday after Christmas

York Center Church of the Brethren

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A story by Max Lucado.

The moonlight was their only light. Huffing and puffing were the only sounds. José walked in front. The trail was narrow. He didn't want his wife to stumble. She carried the baby. He'd offered to do so, but she'd refused.

"He's asleep," she'd explained. "Let him sleep," he'd agreed.

So, they hurried, José in the lead, all their earthly possessions crammed in the backpack he'd purchased from the street vendor in San Salvador. That was weeks ago. How many trains since then? How many miles? How many cold nights?

He glanced over his shoulder. Her eyes caught his. Was that a smile he saw? She's something, this woman, he said to himself. He turned his attention back to the trail. Mesquites on either side scraped against their jeans. Behind them was a village. Within the village was a barn. Within that barn lay, even still, the gathered straw and abandoned feed trough that had served as a bassinet for their baby. The child whimpered. José stopped.

"He is fine," Maria assured before José had time to ask. They continued. The trail emptied into a river that had long since emptied its water into a rancher's pond. The wide, dry riverbed allowed them to walk abreast. No thorns. They moved faster. He hoisted the pack. She secured the child.

A blacktop was near, they'd been told. After a dozen steps they heard the shots. José had been warned of the danger. Just that morning, as the men warmed their hands over the fire in the five-gallon drum, he heard them speak of the cartel. Take the baby and leave, they'd urged him. These men are violent.

He'd hurried back to the barn to tell Maria, but she was sound asleep. He decided to let her rest. When she awoke at noon, her face was pale. She nursed the child and dozed again. José kept an eye toward the door. An old cowboy knew they were using his barn for shelter. He brought them coffee and beans and a blanket for the child.

"Do you know about the gangs?" he asked José. Maria overheard and sat up from her pallet. "You must go," the cowboy told them. But José wanted to wait. "Just another day,

or two. Till you find your strength," he told Maria, though he knew she had enough strength for them both. Nothing fazed her. This sudden journey. This barnyard birth. She was the strong one.

She nodded and stretched out on the pallet. The sun was setting, and the chill was creeping through the walls. He built a fire on the floor, sat next to her, and pulled knees to chest. He ventured a touch to her cheek. She did not stir. Her long hair was silk on her face. So young. Trusting.

He stretched out and closed his eyes. Sleep resisted, then relented. A messenger came to him in a dream. He was tall and light-filled. The same messenger who had spoken to him nine months earlier when spring was in the air and a wedding in his plans. But then came Maria's mysterious pregnancy. Had it not been for this midnight visitor, José might have left her.

Tonight, the messenger came again. The boy is in danger. Blood will be shed. It's time to go. José sat up with a start. He knew he had no choice. He shook Maria awake. "Get your things." Without a word she stood. She grabbed their few possessions and stuffed them in the pack. José lifted the lid of an old toolbox and took out the gifts. Strangers had brought them. They'd traveled far to see his son. Now, José would travel as far as necessary to protect him. Their kindness would fund the journey. He placed the gifts in the pack and looked across the barn. Maria was leaning over their son. Shhh, she assured and lifted him. Within moments the three were out the door and scurrying down the narrow street.

Within minutes they were standing in the riverbed, listening to the crack of gunfire. A woman screamed. A baby cried. Maria tugged on José's sleeve. "We need to go!" she told him. Yes, she was right. Time was short. Safety was within miles. If only they could reach it. They hurried. The riverbed emptied onto a single-lane road. They saw approaching headlights. José waved. A pickup pulled to a stop. José motioned to the truck bed. The driver nodded. The young family climbed in the back and squeezed together.

At one point the baby cried. Maria gave him milk. José looked at the Mexican sky. Stars sparkled like diamonds. For a moment, he wasn't running, he was resting. Imagining a hacienda back home, perhaps? A home of their own, at least?

Maria dozed. Her hooded head lay motionless on his shoulder. A pothole bumped the truck and she awoke. They rode wordlessly for an hour. The black sky gave way to gray, then gold. At the first daylight, the truck came to a stop on the side of the road. "This is as far as I can carry you. What you seek is over the next hill."

José gave the man a gracias and a coin then helped his family climb down. Maria's face was chalked with road dust. The eyes of his son were open, looking at the sky then at his mother. The three set out on the final segment of their escape.

One weary step after another carried them to the top of the hill. When they reached the crest, they stopped and stared. The river below was lined with tents, campfires, and people.

José reached for the newborn. "I'll carry him the rest of the way." Maria gazed at the refugees. "Will we be safe, José?" He looked at her for several moments before answering. The rising sun cast her face in orange.

"Yes, if God wills,"

"Yes," she agreed, "if God wills."

The family turned and began the walk to the border.

An outdoor Nativity Scene at a United Methodist Church in Claremont, CA has made the news recently. Life-size mannequins of Mary and Joseph stand in separate cages topped with barbed wire. Baby Jesus lies in a manger, wrapped in a Mylar blanket, in his own cage. A sign near the scene reads, "What if this family sought refuge in our country today?"

Reverend Martha Morales, the associate pastor, said "Our purpose is to say, 'This is what we believe God is calling us to do.' You've got to call out evil and lift up justice." As you can imagine the church has received both positive and negative responses. So many hate-filled emails arrived that the local police have stationed a patrol car outside the church. One commenter on Facebook wrote, "*Whoever built this lie will burn in hell for blasphemy.*"

The one that caught my eye is the one who wrote, "*So wrong in every sense to politicize the birth of Christ!*" I don't know if this person has ever read the New Testament accounts of the birth of Jesus, but everything about his birth is politicized.

First, two definitions: "Political" is defined as the activities associated with the governance of a country or area, especially the debate or conflict among those having or hoping to achieve power." "Politicize" is defined as "making something political in character."

All we have to do is read the first six words in the second chapter of Matthew to know that the birth of this baby is all about politics. "In the time of King Herod." Matthew's

audience would know right away what that meant and they would cringe. It would be like us reading, "In the time of Adolph Hitler." We would know just what that meant and we too would cringe.

Anna Carter Florence gives us this description. "Herod was one of the cruelest dictators to ever pass through the Middle East, a man so paranoid about succession that he had his own sons executed to keep them from inheriting his throne. You couldn't pick a worse time for the Messiah to be born than in the days of King Herod.

You couldn't pick a worse strategy for the wise men than to cross the border into Israel, head straight for the capitol, and openly ask for the address of some baby that has been born king of the Jews- adding, of course, that this baby's birth announcement was actually written in the stars, for everyone from here to Persian to see."

Herod was a powerful and insecure leader who feared and hated everyone who wasn't him. There was a good reason why, when Herod was afraid, all Jerusalem was terrified. Bad things happened when Herod was afraid- people died, blood was spilled, the innocent suffered. Because of Herod, this story turns very quickly from the adoration and worship of Jesus by the foreign travelers to the terror and violence of a senseless massacre of children. You can't get much more political than that.

For the past five weeks we have been traveling the "Geography of Jesus"- visiting the places that those closest to him visited on their way to his birth. Our preparation for his birth was all about crossing borders, facing danger, taking risks, walking into the unknown, going to places we didn't want to go for reasons we didn't quite understand. We also learned about trusting God in our travels, learning from the faith of those who have gone before us- Elizabeth, Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, John, the shepherds. Our Advent/Christmas journey now takes us to the Gospel of Matthew and the story of the Gentile Wise Men. There is a great deal of traveling in this chapter- the wise men travel from the far east to Jerusalem from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and then from Bethlehem to their home by another way. Joseph and Mary take Jesus and flee from Bethlehem to Egypt, then to Nazareth.

Take a look at the map in your bulletin. Find Bethlehem in the middle of the map and trace the route into Egypt. The Holy family crossed not only borders but continents. They fled to North Africa to save their baby from the paranoid and cruel King Herod. At that time in history there was a large Jewish community established in Egypt. Hundreds of years earlier, when the Babylonian army overran Jerusalem, many Jews fled the war and started new lives in Egypt. So Joseph and Mary probably found a home among their own people in that foreign country.

I found conflicting information when I tried to find out how far they traveled. History doesn't tell us exactly where they went but it is estimated that they traveled three to four hundred miles to safety. The Coptic Christians in Egypt have identified twenty-five places where they believe Mary, Joseph, and Jesus stayed during their sojourn in Egypt. Each place is now the site of a church or monastery to mark the location as holy ground.

Although we may find it frustrating that we don't have the exact details, we have to remember that Matthew was not writing history- he was writing theology, the story of God and God's people. Matthew's church was made up of mostly Jewish Christians- some of whom had been kicked out of their synagogues. They were trying to figure out how to incorporate their Jewish history and tradition with their new Christian faith. Matthew's purpose is to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament Law and Prophets- that Jesus, was indeed, the Messiah promised by God. Matthew helps them to define their new identity without throwing away their legacy as Jews. He also writes to deal with the thorny issue of accepting Gentiles, non-Jews, into the Christian family.

Both Luke and Matthew show us that the story of the birth of Jesus is a story about power- God's power versus the power of the Empire. The power of life versus the powers of death. Not everyone is happy when Jesus is born because he threatens the foundations of religious and civil power. He came to subvert human values and priorities and in doing so, to establish the reign of God. From the very beginning, the road Jesus walks is marked by both God's promises and human resistance. Jesus is the living presence of God's promises and a constant irritant to those who claimed human power.

There is nothing sentimental about Matthew's birth story. It is set in the turbulence and terror of a violent history where tyrants murder children and families flee in the middle of the night.

Can you imagine living in a time like that? Unfortunately, too many people can.

According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, currently, 70.8 million people worldwide have been forcibly displaced from their homes. 25.9 million of those are considered refugees- over half of which are under 18 years of age. Refugees are defined as those persons who are fleeing conflict or persecution. International law demands that refugees are to be protected and must not be expelled or forcibly returned to dangerous situations.

The Gospel stories of the birth of Jesus show us quite clearly that through this birth God graciously, mysteriously, and defiantly breaks into human lives. This newborn baby is born into a world where he is not welcomed by those in power. He will spend his life crossing borders, welcoming outcasts, and breaking down the walls erected by human fear, hatred, and evil.

So tell me, please, how is this story is **not** political? Tell me how Jesus did **not** threaten the powers that be. Tell me, where does Jesus stand right now, in this time, and in this place? Throughout his life Jesus will incite the fury of a threatened Herod. In the end they will kill him, but we know that wasn't the end. We know that Herod still stalks the earth and children are still at risk. But when the Herods are all dead and gone, the Son of God will still live.

David Lose reminds us that Matthew's account is realistic. *"We live in a world riddled by fear, a world of devastating super-storms and elementary school massacres, a world where innocents die every day of preventable illness and hunger. Matthew renders an accurate if also difficult picture of the world. And that is what is at the heart of Matthew's darker story of Jesus' birth: the promise that it is precisely **this** world that God came to, **this** people so mastered by fear that we often do the unthinkable to each other and ourselves, **this** gaping need that we have and bear that God remedies.*

Jesus is Emanuel, God with us, the loving, breathing, and vulnerable promise that God chose to come and live and die for us, as we are, so that in Christ's resurrection we, too might experience new life."

The birth of Jesus disrupted the world.

Let's make sure we allow him to disrupt ours.

Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER- Matthew 2:13-18

Holy God, we pray this morning- in this Christmas season for your messengers- those who bring your word to your people. We give you thanks for those who warn and those who provide comfort.

We pray this day for those who must flee from home to protect their families. We pray for mothers and fathers and children who must leave behind everything they hold

dear and travel dangerous roads to find safety. We pray for those who have been turned away, those who are languishing in refugee camps around the world, those who are sitting in cages on our own border.

We pray this day for those who provide comfort for refugees and sojourners- for churches and organizations who show your love through donations of beds, meals, and clothing. We give you thanks for lawyers, medical personnel, social workers and clergy who give of their time to help those in need.

We pray this day for those who make the laws and wage the wars that endanger the lives of the innocent. We pray for our government and governments around the world who choose self-preservation over compassion. We pray for those whose job it is to hunt down, arrest, and guard those seeking asylum and safety.

We pray this day for us, Holy God, forgive us for our complicity in power systems that decide who belongs and who doesn't. Forgive us for thinking that we alone are worthy. Forgive us for believing that what happens thousands of miles away in this country and around the world isn't our concern.

Heal us, Gracious God, heal us of our anger and hatred, our divisions and our conflicts so that all of your children may live in safety and harmony.

Thank you for the gift of Jesus- the One who was a refugee and grew to be our Savior. Amen.