

Another Way
Isaiah 63:7-9; Matthew 2:13-23

For some reason, this year more than any other, I have been intrigued by the number and depth of dreams included in the birth narrative of Jesus. In today's reading from the Gospel According to Matthew there are 3 dreams included. Each one addresses how Joseph should move the family to keep them safe.

First, go to Egypt because Herod wants to find the Messiah King and kill him. Think about this. Egypt was under Roman rule, was outside of Herod's jurisdiction, but Egypt was the place where family ancestors had been slaves.

Second, "Get up and take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Again, Joseph is faithful and the small family move to Israel. The child crying, the mother exhausted, Joseph's heart clutching in his throat every time he sees a soldier, they move again. Dealing with a strange language and unfamiliar foods and customs, they are now told they can go home!

However, no sooner do they arrive than the third dream, more a nightmare, comes. Yes, Herod is dead, but Archelaus, a man just as cruel as his father, Herod, is ruling in Judea. So, the family heads a little further north – to Galilee. They cannot go home after all. And so, this refugee family continues to travel, trying to find safety, Hopeful for a future.

Jesus starts his childhood as a refugee: fleeing from Judea to Egypt, and then from Judea to Galilee. The infant Jesus has nowhere to lay his head from the day he is born. The Holy Family is a refugee family.

Some of you have heard me share the story of a Thursday in November, 2012 as I stood in the Golan Heights region of Israel, looking down on the checkpoint at the Syrian border, praying for peace, watching a young boy and girl, running and playing on a bomb bunker, when I was introduced to the sound of a bomb exploding in the city of Damascus. I had never heard that sound before, but it forever changed my life. The rat-a-tat-tat of return artillery fire followed. The group I traveled with was shaken by the sounds, but the children below were unaffected, continuing to run and play. It was only after I returned home that I read in *Presbyterians Today* that the bomb I heard had destroyed the Presbyterian Church in Damascus, Syria! From that day forward the Syrian refugees have held a place in my heart.

Hear this story of one family who has fled the fighting, seeking safety:

“In our home in Damascus, I lived with my wife, our children, my parents, siblings and their family,” begins Amir, a 29-year-old, Stateless Palestinian that arrived in Bangkok nearly two years ago with his wife and two daughters.

“Before Ramadan 2012, the conflict in Syria became markedly worse. We heard gunfire and no one would go out onto the streets. My family and I stayed in our house for days because

we were afraid. I cannot tell you the exact number of days. On the last day, we had no bread. We had nothing to eat.”

After days boarded up in their house, Aamir went out to get milk and diapers for his daughters. At a checkpoint, the Freedom Army stopped him and tried to recruit him. He refused, which meant certain death if he were to be stopped again in the future. “The last words from them were: the next time we see you, either you take your gun and stand beside us or you find someone to take your body.”

Panicked, Aamir returned home, gathered his family and their belongings and traveled to Lebanon. In Beirut, Aamir and his family were able to obtain visas to come to Thailand. “The greatest challenge is [being] in Thailand without a visa. This issue could easily put us in jail. I try as much as possible to avoid being on the streets or even going out regularly. The second challenge is the lack of financial support and the difficulties to find work. Until now it has not been easy to overcome these challenges.”

In late 2012, Aamir heard about Asylum Access Thailand and sought assistance with his asylum claim. AAT prepared Aamir’s first instance testimony and supporting legal brief to submit to the UNHCR; then helped him prepare for his Refugee Status Determination interview. Fortunately, both he and his family were granted refugee status. As a recognized refugee, Aamir and his family can live more at ease in their new home. “Since I got my refugee status, I’ve been so relieved. Now the future is clear for my family, especially my kids.”

And this story:

Faez al Sharaa was sure he was going to die. He was walking to work in his hometown of Daraa, the southern Syrian city where the protests against President Bashar al-Assad first erupted. For young civilians like Faez, now 28, leaving the house in the spring of 2013 had become a game of Russian roulette. Dozens were dying each day in the civil war between Assad’s forces and antigovernment insurgents. The ancient farming town of Daraa had become a grisly battlefield. Dissidents had disappeared. Children had been plucked off the streets for suspected anti-government activities, only to be tortured by authorities.

On that Tuesday morning in late March, Faez was confronted by a group of Syrian army soldiers. They were looking for a man who had been spotted with a handgun. Faez and three others were detained and accused of being terrorists. Standing at gunpoint, his hands in the air, he recalls feeling furious with himself for risking the solo walk to work. “We felt death upon us, and we accepted it,” he says now. “I can’t describe it in words.”

He got lucky. At that moment, an old woman barreled into the street, begging the gun-toting soldiers to spare these men. They were her son, her nephew, her neighbors, the old lady pleaded. Faez had never seen the woman before. But the soldiers relented. The stranger saved his life.

By the time Faez returned home that night from his job at a healthcare company, he had resolved to flee Syria. He talked it over with his wife, informed his mother, and then reached

out online to an underground group known for smuggling Syrians into Jordan. Again Faez was fortunate: the smugglers had space in a private car to carry him and his wife to the border the next day.

The couple packed their bags with clothing, photos from their wedding and a few keepsakes: a set of colored bowls they had received as a gift, a glimmering golden plate inscribed with the Shahada, the Muslim profession of faith. The following morning, they walked out the door and left their life behind.

Before Christmas I was invited to join a group of ladies for lunch in the home of Ross and Thea Nyll as they thanked the group from FPC for bringing their family from a refugee camp to Thomasville over 35 years ago! Hearing their stories of uncertainty and hope, of fear and love, of distrust and faithfulness, I was moved to think even further of the REAL story of Christmas.

The REAL picture of that first Christmas does not sparkle and shine, it is NOT the romanticized view displayed in the nativities displayed in homes and churches around our communities. Perhaps it would be most appropriate to put away the shepherds and sheep, the wisemen's gifts, but keep out Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Just the three of them – all alone – facing the terrors of a brutal world. No visitors. No sheltering barn. No cuddly-looking sheep. No friendly oxen. Then we should move them from one location to another in our church. Perhaps a window, looking out on the larger world where there is still violence and terror, and where there are still refugees fleeing, needing protection, human beings in whom the Christ is crying to us for protection.

If only there were more dreams like Joseph's. If only there were more messengers of God instructing poor, vulnerable people in the world today. If only there were more refugees finding safe places to flee to and live for a time. If only there were more innocent lives saved—especially the lives of children.

Today, I ask you to imagine things differently. Is there another way to imagine this Christmas Story? How would you like Joseph's dreams to be different? What might Joseph's dreams be if you were to write this scripture another way?