

2023 01 01 – Fleeing for Our Lives

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25 (The Inclusive Bible)

In 2014, just before I arrived in Swift Current, my sister, Colette, and I went on a trip to Ireland. It was a trip we had been talking about for years. We went as tourists to explore a new country, but we also went as researchers to find out more about our own lineage. You see, we knew that our mother's ancestors had arrived in Canada from Ireland back in the first half of the nineteenth century. It was fascinating to visit some of the places where they had lived and to learn more about their history and ours.

Our Irish ancestors were actually Scots-Irish having travelled from Scotland to Ireland in the 1600's. We don't know exactly why they came to Canada, but I'm sure they came in search of a better life. According to historical records, the Scots-Irish came to Canada in search of religious freedom, prosperity and the possibility of owning their own land. By the 1840's when the potato famine struck, Irish refugees were literally fleeing for their lives.

I'm sure that most of us can find stories of immigrants and refugees in our own family histories. Some like me, have to go back five or six generations, but for others, the stories are more recent. Here, in Saskatchewan, many of you have grandfathers or great-grandfathers who settled on this land. Some in this congregation are first generation immigrants. And, of course, we also have had the experience of supporting a recent refugee family. A family that are now

Canadian citizens and are hoping to welcome more of their relatives to Swift Current.

In recent years, it seems that the number of people “fleeing for their lives” in our world is increasing. In fact, the numbers are astounding. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Over 27.1 million refugees around the world depend on UNHCR for protection and support.”

<https://www.unhcr.ca/about-us/who-we-help/> And the actual number of refugees is at least three times higher. As we all know, the latest group of immigrants and refugees are arriving from war-torn Ukraine, while exiles from Afghanistan, Syria, South Sudan, Venezuela and many more countries are still languishing in refugee camps, in urban settings or are internally displaced within their own countries.

The rising number of refugees is an issue that hits close to home for our community and our church family and yet we often forget that Jesus was also a refugee. In today’s scripture passage from the Gospel of Matthew, we are reminded that, while he was just a little child, Joseph and Mary fled with Jesus, to Egypt. They left Bethlehem because they believed that Jesus’ life was in danger. They left because the ruling power in Judea was threatened by their tiny child. They left because Herod was about to kill all the children under two years of age in Bethlehem. They left because they were fleeing for Jesus’ life.

Thank goodness most of us will never know that level of fear and anxiety. Most of us will never be persecuted because of who we are: our race, our culture, our

sexual orientation, our gender identity, our politics, our religion, our sex or our age. Most of us will never know what it feels like to literally flee for our lives. But today's story reminds us that Joseph, Mary and Jesus did. They knew that level of fear.

Today's story also clearly states that in the midst of their fleeing, God was with them; they were not alone. According to the story it was an Angel of God that warned Joseph that they needed to leave, it was an Angel of God that let him know when it was safe to return, and an angel that suggested the district of Galilee would be an even safer place to raise his family.

The author of the Gospel of Matthew assures us that this is how Jesus ended up being a Nazarene, someone who came from the town of Nazareth. And, of course, we all know that this little refugee child grew up to become a rabbi, a teacher, a preacher, and a healer. He grew into a man who cared for the poor, befriended the outcast and shone a light on hypocrites. He preached the good news of the reign of God, a world of peace and justice for all. Despite being a refugee, or maybe because of it, Jesus became the type of person that those in power had reason to fear.

"A refugee is someone who survived and who can create the future." This is the Moment for Reflection in today's bulletin. I found this quote last week on the Internet and I loved its message of tenacity and hope. It turns out that the person who wrote this quote was also a refugee. Amela Koluder was a teenager, in 1993, when she fled from Bosnia-Herzegovina eventually arriving in Norway as

a war refugee. I don't know anything about her life as a refugee but I do know that she now works, both professionally and as a volunteer, to promote innovation, culture, diversity and integration.

Amela has also recently written a children's book, called Yutoland, a fairy tale based on her experience as a refugee. She has written the book as a way to help children process the difficult emotions that are part of frightening experiences. She notes that refugee children lose their carefree childhoods when they encounter some of the worst traumas life can offer. But, at the same time, their hopes and dreams for the future become more alive and, at times, all-consuming. Yutoland is a story of hardship and of hope, of pain and of transformation. I would have loved to have read some of it to you today, but it is written in Norwegian and Bosnian and I'm afraid the English translation has yet to be published. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/interview-with-amela-koluder-creative-leader-writer/id1605746122?i=1000559283582>

Amela's story, like Jesus' story, reminds that we have the strength and the ability to overcome difficult situations in our lives. And these stories remind us that no matter how difficult life may seem, we are never alone. God's angels come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, sometimes they come in the form of other people, sometimes they come in dreams and sometimes they manifest within us, as hope, strength and love. I can't wait for the English translation of Yutoland. I would love to know how those angels appeared to Amela.

On this first day of a New Year may we all remember that we, whether we are refugees are not, we have the privilege and the ability to create the future. May it be a future of peace and justice. Amen.