

Refuge

Christmas Eve, Dec. 24, 2016
Based on Matthew 2:7-15, 19-23
By Rev. Dr. John Suk

This year—the last few years, actually—has been the year of the refugee. Over the past few months, more than a million refugees have made their way to Europe—which sort of puts Canada's 35,000 or America's 12,000 Syrian refugees into a larger perspective. The world is home to seventy million refugees right now—a number that has doubled in the past ten or twelve years.

More compelling than the numbers are the television and internet images we all see—images of children being passed through barbed wire fences, of trains full of hungry migrants, of small inflatable boats loaded with hundreds of people—or not, bobbing in the Mediterranean—of lines of people on the march looking for a way through the Balkans, of Asians on their way to Australia or Palestinians turned out of their homes living in refugee camps instead.

My own family knows something about refugees. When I was a child, walking to a parochial “Dutch” Christian school, kids going to the public school used to yell, “Dutchie, Dutchie, DP” (which means “displaced person”) at me and my siblings. And, in a way, those kids were right. My parents were economic migrants looking for a better life in Canada, after the war.

And in case you think there isn't any history of refugees in your family, consider this—two of Canada's largest immigrant groups, historically, were the British Empire Loyalists fleeing the American Revolution, and Irish immigrants fleeing the potato famine a generation later. Many of us have ancestors from one or both of these groups. And I haven't even mentioned the Underground Railroad, or the 1956 Hungarian revolution, or Vietnam war resisters, or the Vietnamese refugees after the fall of Saigon. One has to wonder when the First Nations people will raise their hands to all of us relative newcomers and say, “enough already!”

This has been the year of the refugee. It's something to think about during the Christmas season, for not only are we a nation of refugees, but the founder of our religion, Christianity, lived almost his entire life as a refugee. According to our scripture, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem, his family fled to Egypt to escape Herod's political repression. A few years later, rather than risk a return to Bethlehem, Joseph moved his young family to Nazareth, a Jewish outpost outside of Jerusalem's control.

This Jesus once said that, “the poor will always be with us.” He might as well have said that refugees will always be with us. It's a problem the Bible returns to again and again. From Leviticus: “When foreigners reside among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner . . . must be treated as a native-born.” Deuteronomy: “God defends the cause of the fatherless

and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing.” Exodus: “Do not oppress the foreigner.” Kings: “Do whatever the foreigner asks of you.” In the New Testament: “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat . . . I was a stranger and you invited me in.” And so, on and on.

This congregation has responded generously to Canada’s current refugee crisis. We sent over twenty-thousand dollars, a year ago, to support the work of refugee agencies working with refugees in the Middle East. When the government asked, we stepped up to sponsor a refugee family from Syria. We have gathered furniture, scouted apartments, and raised more than enough money. Our family has not yet arrived, and it’s been frustrating, especially since we have spoken to our refugee family as they await permission to come, in Turkey. Still, that price we pay, the waiting, is tiny compared to the price that many refugees pay.

This has been the year of the refugee. And where there was no room in the inn, in Bethlehem, here at Lawrence Park Community Church, we have committed to being Egypt when Bethlehem is unsafe; and being Nazareth when the powerful of the world prey on the weak. As a church, we have become, over and over again over the past thirty years, a refuge for refugees. For Christ’s sake, thank-you.

But there is one more thing I want to say.

Toronto, like Bethlehem, can be a difficult city when it comes to finding refuge, if you need refuge, if you need a safe place, if you need people to embrace you. Even among longtime residents, many Torontonians are at loose ends. In his book, *Happy City*, Charles Montgomery writes, “Social isolation just may be the greatest environmental hazard of city living – worse than noise, pollution, or even crowding.” Six million Canadians are alone, according to an article in *Observer* this past summer. Traffic makes it impossible to get around during visiting hours, so we stay home alone. Parents have fewer kids and when they grow up they rarely move just around the corner—they often move to the other end of the country. We’re plugged solo into virtual communities that offer little by way of a glass of wine or intimacy. Couples juggle two jobs and long commutes, meaning they have little time for liesure. Neighbourhoods are segregated—even here—by income and class and race and ethnicity. Prejudice—whether on the basis of race or gender or sexual orientation or appearance is a daily struggle for many people.

And ultimately, what makes Lawrence Park Community Church a refuge is not merely the fact that we generously support a refugee family every five or ten years; no, we are a refuge church because everyone, for whatever reason, is welcome here—foreign refugees and everyone else. Are you lonely? New to the city? Welcome. Are you gay or transgendered? Are you spiritually curious but not orthodox? Welcome. Are you living together but not married? Are you a single parent? Welcome. Are you wealthy and tired of having someone wag a finger at you for being a one-percenter? Are you yearning for a place where people stop to look you in the eye and ask “how are things?” You are welcome, for Jesus the refugee grew up to say, “Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find [refuge] for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Oh, we’re not perfect here at Lawrence Park Community Church. We’re always learning on the job. Like the citizens of Bethlehem, we’re still figuring out how best to use time and money and wisdom to make a positive difference for everyone who needs refuge.

But whether you are from Syria or Jane and Finch or Post Road; whether you are a new immigrant or merely descended from one; whether you are sure in your faith or full of doubt and misgivings, whether you come just for Tai Chi classes or for choir or to serve suppers at the Out of the Cold program, whether you arrive on a donkey or a Tesla—everyone is welcome, because at LPCC, we are committed to being a sanctuary and to making next year here a year of refuge.