

“Refugees Return”  
The Reverend Michael L. Delk  
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
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Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

We see them on television and read about them on the Internet, but we rarely brush against them, and even then, we might not know that we’ve encountered a refugee. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees places the worldwide number of those displaced from their homes at 42 million, but even the UNHCR admits that their figure is likely low. In fact, no one really knows how many people have been driven into exile by war, famine, natural disaster, or disease. And no one knows what may become of them, except that their chance of return is slight, and the process for those precious few who do make it back home is excruciatingly slow.

I’ve been privileged to know a few of the lucky ones, which has sensitized me to the plight of the vast majority who are not so blessed. These fortunate few have not returned to their homes and almost certainly never will, but they have made a new home in America as legal immigrants through the refugee program of The Episcopal Church in collaboration with the Immigration and Naturalization Service of the United States.

The first refugees I met arrived here in 1998 from Sarajevo by way of Hamburg, Germany, where for two years they lived on a cargo container ship in the harbor. The Prasovic family – mom, dad, and three boys – left their home in the former Yugoslavia during the troubles there. They fled because they shared a mixed marriage: dad was Muslim; mom, Orthodox Christian. It made them and their children prime targets for the sectarian hatred and violence that was tearing the region apart. The Prasovic family was among the more fortunate. They saw

the danger coming, had the means to escape, found temporary asylum in Germany, and were deemed eligible for permanent asylum in America.

Our parish in Lexington, Kentucky, had prepared for many months to receive them. We secured an apartment filled with donated furniture and clothing, set up temporary governments benefits until they could get on their feet, and started hunting for jobs on their behalf even before they arrived. I'll never forget the day they landed at Bluegrass airport, because they'd been in town about an hour when I lost them.

You see, on the way to their new home, we stopped off to pick up some beer at a rundown grocery. (Dad wasn't a super-observant Muslim.) We were chatting away in a mixture of English and German when suddenly I noticed that I was talking to myself. Turning around, there was no one there, and I panicked. What do you do when someone new to your country disappears? I quickly returned to the front of the store, where I found father and two sons stock still and staring in stunned silence at a grocery that had frankly seen better days. That was clue number one that I was clueless: clueless about the world they had come from and what they had been through; clueless about the fabulous plenty that we so often take for granted. I snapped them out of their trance, and we proceeded to debate the various merits of the obscene selection of beers available.

Long story short, they got jobs, learned better English, and got better jobs. The kids did well in school, and eventually the whole family gained citizenship. Maybe someday they will return to Sarajevo, but only to visit. Though refugees no longer, they will never return to their original home. It no longer exists, and they are among the lucky ones.

Then there's the family from Congo I met while serving in Atlanta. At first, only the father visited my office on the third floor of the Cathedral. Let's call him Simon. He and his

wife and two children fled down a fire escape as his father and few other relatives were being shot to death in the next room. As they made their way out of Congo, Simon got separated from his family. Out foraging for supplies, he came back to find his family gone. Unable to locate them, he did the only thing he could do: move on. Eventually, he made it to a safe West African country, where he gained refugee status and entered the United States, landing in Atlanta, where he immediately set to work on two jobs, never expecting to see his family again. But he never gave up hope.

Through friends and family still living in Congo, he discovered that his wife and children had been captured by one of the factions fighting there and were being held in prison. Simon managed to convince a friend to act as an intermediary, and by scrupulously saving for over two years, Simon earned enough money to bribe a guard to let them free.

His wife and children made their way to another West African nation and like Simon achieved refugee status. Problem was that Simon had spent all his savings on bribing the guard, and had no way of flying them to the United States, which is why he was in my office.

The parish I served in Atlanta was enormous and possessed extensive resources. After completing a thorough check of Simon's story, which took the better part of a day, and consulting with the keeper of our communal discretionary account, I was able to ask Simon, "So when would you like your family to arrive?" "Well, as soon as possible, I suppose," he replied. Sitting at my desk I asked, "How about next Friday?" "That would be wonderful!" Fingers on the computer keyboard, I inquired "Could you spell their full names for me?" "Why do you need to know that?" "Well, Simon, I need their full names to make the flight reservations." An incandescent joy filled that room. It was one of the most exciting days of my service as a priest.

Long story short, the family has been reunited for several years now, and remains alive and well in Atlanta.

Jesus was a refugee as well. He started his life as one, according to the Gospel of Matthew. King Herod, desperate to destroy any threat to his power, sent his soldiers on a murderous rampage in Bethlehem. They killed every male child under the age of two, which even by the most paranoid of margins was being a bit too thorough. Jesus was one of the lucky ones, perhaps the only lucky one.

An angel came to Joseph in a dream and warned him to escape to Egypt. He and Mary believed the dream, grabbed Jesus, and fled to a land where ironically their people had once been enslaved. Here is the Savior of the world on the run. They were fortunate. Once Herod died, which only took a few years, it was safe to come back home to Nazareth, where for many years we can reasonably assume they enjoyed a normal life.

Whether Jesus had any memory of his time away and how it might have affected him, we cannot say. Presumably, Mary told Jesus of his early days in faraway lands, waiting for the wrath of Herod to quite literally die down. What remains important for us is that we always remember: we worship a refugee. Let me repeat that: we worship a refugee, a man forced from his home by the threat of death. However, Jesus, unlike so many refugees, found his way back home, and by so doing made a path for us to follow.

You see, there are plenty of real refugees in the world, people who have lost a home and have nowhere to go, and then there are spiritual refugees, of whom there are about six billion, who are trying to make their way back home. Each of us, in our own way, suffers from a spiritual dislocation.

We are abroad in an uncomfortable and unwelcome world. This has been the condition of every human being who ever lived, except one: Jesus. Though he was a true refugee, he never experienced the sort of spiritual dislocation we know only too well.

We seek out a place where our souls may abide in peace. We yearn to settle down and stop our wandering through the wastelands of passing fashion, political ideology, and crass entertainments. And Jesus, having once made the journey from Egypt to Nazareth, stands ready to show us how to make it home from the spiritual equivalent we endure.

The way is rarely easy or straightforward. It requires great patience to navigate the detours and the long pauses by the roadside and the dead ends and the wrong directions. There are no Tom-Tom's to guide us, though plenty of people aspire or pretend to be such. Yet if we persist and follow the way of Jesus, we will find our home in a peace that exceeds understanding, a joy that escapes description, a love that knows no bounds. And once we make it back home, Jesus will be waiting for us there, and not just on the other side of the divide between life and death, but even while on this Earth, we can find solace in the Body of Christ, in which Jesus has seen fit to dwell. Indeed, in a way we cannot fully fathom, Jesus both awaits us yet simultaneously acts as our companion on our return trip from spiritual exile. And as the Body of Christ, a collection of refugees, we are called to offer refuge to others.

So in this New Year, as we celebrate the prospect of a fresh start, may we resolve to endure, and rejoice to give thanks, for unlike so many separated from their homes in this world, all people – all people – share the opportunity to return from spiritual exile and find a home in the heart of Jesus. Amen.

