

Immigration Reflection

May 2011

Rev. Pam Cottrill

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod.

- Matthew 2:13-15

Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus were immigrants in Egypt. Now, nothing is said about their lives during these two years. Here, Scripture leaves the reader with a wide open space to wonder what their life was like as immigrants. How did they live?

Did they speak the same language as the Egyptians? Did they have trouble finding a place to live with no local references or credit history? Could Joseph find any carpentry work? Did the other moms let Mary and Jesus, who were different than they were, participate in their play groups? Were they accepted into the community or were they whispered about and excluded because they were outsiders?

It also leaves wide open questions about how Mary and Joseph felt about having to leave their home – probably the only place they had ever lived – the place where their family and friends were. They must have been frightened and lonely – two young parents trying to raise this miraculous baby without the support of their extended family. And then after two years in a strange country not being able to return to their hometown but having to settle in Nazareth – a town of questionable worth.

I wonder if Mary and Joseph had their work permits and visas in order before going to Egypt. From our Scripture reading, it sounds like they just picked up and went for fear of their child's life. Who could blame them? If they had lived today, Herod would most certainly have arrived to kill their baby Jesus long before their immigration paperwork had been processed. Thus, Jesus was an undocumented alien.

There was a time when I did not understand the immigration issues in our country. I had a very shallow perception that we would not have an immigration problem if people simply went through the proper channels to gain legal entry to the United States. It made no sense to me why people from Mexico wouldn't fill out the appropriate paper work and get the documents they needed to come to this country.

It wasn't until I started to read immigrants' stories and hear their personal witnesses and build relationships with them that I came to understand that the issue was much more complicated than it seemed on the surface. I found out that most of the Mexican people were hard working and wanted to stay in their homeland with their families.

But when policies like NAFTA, The North American Free Trade Agreement, went into effect under the facade of providing fair trade for everyone, it virtually eliminated the small farmers from being able to make a living; and it exploited workers in factories so that they could not earn sustainable wages.

And when drug lords took over large areas and random violence made it unsafe to live in many towns; and when there was no safe drinking water available, illness and malnutrition became the norm; and

when the cost of legal immigration fees was prohibitive; And when the waiting time was 5 to 20 years for a visa for the people who did manage to somehow fill out all the lengthy paperwork, pay the high fees, and face the hardship of travelling across dangerous land to the city to file their application; these people became desperate.

They were faced with two grim choices. Either they stay where they were and they and their children would die waiting for a green card – if not from hunger, or illness, then from violence. Or, they could risk their lives by trying to enter the United States without the proper documents.

With this second choice, there was a good chance they would die; but there was at least some hope that they would live. Now, which of us if faced with certain death or possible life wouldn't choose life?

When I heard the heart wrenching stories of people's life and death decisions, I no longer saw undocumented immigrants as a legal and statistical issue but as a humanitarian issue. My heart starting yelling at me, "this is what Jesus means when he calls us to free the oppressed."

The change of heart that God brought about was a direct result of having spent time with, and building relationships with people who were different than me. I had to enter into relationships with people I did not understand in order for God to move me from an intellectual faith to a faith of the heart.

I am a law-abiding United States citizen who encourages others to follow the law too. But when political and legal systems are oppressive, Jesus calls all Christians to stand up for the least, the lost, and the outcast. Jesus frequently "bucked" the system when the system was repressive. Remember when he went against the law of the time and healed on the Sabbath? (Matthew 12:10-14; Luke 6:6-9). Remember when Jesus justified his disciples breaking the Law by allowing them to pick grain to eat on the Sabbath? (Matthew 12:1-6; Luke 6:1-5). Remember when he stood up for the woman caught in adultery and opposed the legal sentence of stoning her death? (John 8:3-11). Remember when Jesus overturned the money-changers' tables in the temple because of their unfair business practices? (Matthew 21:12-13; John 2:14-16). Followers of Jesus must work to change oppressive laws.