

African Nativity: Stories of refuge and refugees



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Pastors, priests, rabbis and imams have preached on this for centuries. It is perhaps the central story of all the Bible: refugees seeking refuge. The search for a home or homeland is critical to understanding the biblical narrative. Hebrew slaves escaped from Egypt ... Jesus and his Jewish parents escaped to Egypt. Passovers without passports. In both narratives there was forced movement from one place to another and new faiths were forged from fearfulness and injustice. As formerly enslaved African American, Harriet Jacobs, wrote: "There are no bonds so strong as those which are formed by suffering together."

Today, about 90 percent of Egyptians are Sunni Muslim, 10 percent Christian and there are about 100 Jews. So Muslims, Christians and Jews are still living with tensions as their faiths grow old together. Freethinkers in Egypt are often treated as social outcasts, "persecuted and forced into hiding" (Humanists International). At the same time, "some religious leaders and media personalities continued to employ discriminatory language against Christians." Yet, the gov-

ernment also re-opened a historic synagogue in Alexandria, and Islamic teachers encouraged Muslims "to congratulate Christians on their holidays, to assist non-Muslims in need, and to stop using [religious] beliefs as means to harm or diminish others."

When people of faith forget where they came from, the lands they left by choice or by force, forgetting their own refugee status in history, something happens to their faith-story. Biblical religions began with people searching for refuge, shelter, sanctuary. Though some have turned that story into a spiritual pilgrimage to a sanctuary in the sky, to personal salvation, those original refugee-seekers were in communal crisis, on the move for a place to belong, a space to freely practice their beliefs. Tradition consists of one group of refugees handing down their story to a new generation of refugees.

A courageous collective memory urges us to connect those ancient stories to the plight of those in flight today, those severed from sanctuary and security. We can honor the old stories by weaving loose threads, creating safety nets for the most vulnerable.

The United Nations reports over 80 million people worldwide are "forcibly displaced." Closer to home, this holiday season, as winter temperatures dipped into the 20s, urban refugees living in tents near a church were "cleared" –

chased and displaced. Happy holidays. Sorry, but this touches the forgotten offense of the original stories.

One definition of the word refugee is "a harbor, a port in a storm." Having lived most of my life near a bay and ocean, this image rings loud like a ship's bell, blasting like a foghorn on a lighthouse or bridge. The sound of shelter. A promise of protection. Yet, how can people find their way to safe harbor? "Do you hear what I hear?" – the voices of refugees near and far, voices of loss as well as liberation.

Is the massive migration of human lives today that much different than in ages past? Is it possible there are new religions being born among the migrants? Could a fertile kind of faith or freethinking give birth to something revolutionary, a binding together of refugees, the shared humanity of refugee-seekers? Could this be a refuge beyond religion itself?

Reflecting on the meaning of nativity, we might consider what we've lost under the tinsel and twinkling lights. Has nativism – a preference for the land of our birth, protecting our own customs and culture – obscured the instability of the stable story? The ancient tale, honestly told, isn't a pretty package wrapped in glitter and gold. Yet it may still present a deeply meaningful truth for both believers and nonbelievers.

A brown baby is born in a Middle East-ern barn and his persecuted family must flee their homeland to somewhere they have never been as powerful forces seek to do violence against the powerless. It's a troubling and tragic tale of destabilizing displacement, dehumanization and disappointment. There are few, if any, silent nights. This is no children's carol with tidings of comfort and joy. Yet ... there's a flicker of light and hope ahead. The dark passageway to the unknown is a perilous journey illuminated by a string of refugees along the route, marked by compassionate communities offering temporary, tentative safety. The risks are real, the suffering is real, as is the driving dream of liberation, made possible, survivable by those who open their homes and lives, symbolic torches lit along the treacherous paths.

We're not used to hearing these stories in this way, but we need to. Timeless tales out of Africa connect us to the ebb and flow of humanity in ceaseless currents of change. If there is a hidden treasure under a tree, this may be it.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His latest books are "Friendly Freethinker," "Broken Bridges" and "A Freethinker's Gospel." Learn more at chighland.com.