

**Message: Refugee and Refuge Dec 29, 2013**

What must it be like – most often under the cover of darkness, to waken your family, grab a few belongings, sheer necessities and run?

Did anyone hear us?

Have they discovered we've gone?

What was that noise?

Did the children say anything about our clandestine preparations?

Are we strong enough?

How can I leave my parents, my sisters, my brothers?

Shhh! Quietly, don't make a noise.

Hurry, please don't cry.

I know you little ones don't understand.

How far do we have to go?

Is this the right thing to do?

How long will this violence go on?

Why must I leave my home, my country?

Will I ever be able to come back?

Over 3000 years ago, the Israelites asked this question as Moses led them out of Egypt? Over 2000 years ago, Joseph led his new family back into Egypt to escape the wrath of King Herod.

Can you imagine being a family with a young child making a trek of more than 40 miles over rough, arid and stony terrain, hiding along with the other families and their young children in caves to avoid Herod's soldiers, and escape from Judea. How fortunate for Joseph to be a carpenter, an immensely useful and portable trade. He was able to build shelter and help others during those early years of Jesus' life in Egypt.

As a refugee you would most likely be a woman or a child. Before, during or after your escape you may have been beaten or abused by your enemies or those who were

supposed to protect you. Your husband and older sons may have been killed or conscripted by warring armies, or they may have stayed behind to try to protect your home. I can barely imagine the overwhelming load on the families?

Although Canada has a reputation and actually been rewarded with the UN Nansen Award for outstanding humanitarianism tradition in resettling refugees, it wasn't always so. Our regional history is in fact marred by the expulsion of the Acadians from the Maritime Provinces. Likewise our first nations people throughout Canada became Internally Displaced People, being moved into their own refugee camps or reserves.

The Canadian history for the most part is a country of welcome. Geographically we had the space and not enough people to settle it, farm it, access our natural resources or man our increasing industries. Saint Andrews, Saint John, Fredericton and Doaktown were settled by United Empire Loyalists as were Antigonish, Digby, Shelburne, Sheet Harbour, Summerville and Wallace, Nova Scotia.

Close to the same time in the late 1700's Scots Highlanders such as Don's family were driven from the Isle of Skye and other parts of the Highlands so that the farms could be turned over for the raising of sheep.

The Underground Railway brought many slaves to freedom in Canada in the early 1800's. In the 1830's, Canada welcomed Poles, followed closely by Irish people escaping the Great Famine. Between 1880 and 1914, Canada resettled Italians, Jews and Ukrainians. Persons from Central and Eastern Europe displaced by World War II and the spread of Communism made their way across the Atlantic to our shores in the 1950's along with Palestinian Arabs, Middle Eastern and African Jews and Hungarians. The 1960's brought Chinese refugees and Czechs, the 70's saw Chileans and Latin Americans, Soviet Jews, Bengali Muslims, Tibetans, Ugandans and Iranians. The upheaval in Vietnam brought both Boat People and Khmer Cambodians. In the 1990's there were Bosnians and Kosovars; the 2000's brought Karens from camps in Thailand and Bhutanese. In 2010, Canada granted asylum to people from over 140 countries. In fact, today 1 in every 50 people in the world is a refugee.

Within Canada we have our own Internally Displaced Persons (IDP's), people who fled persecution or family violence. Driven by fear, bordering on terror, every day people escape a known threat and run into the unknown. They seek refuge and become refugees.

Although like the holy family, the majority of refugees flee violence; social, ethnic or religious persecution; and/or destruction of homes by wars; they also become economic refugees as in the case of the Irish escaping the Great Famine, or natural disasters such as in Haiti or the Philippines.

How many of you here today can identify refugees within your ancestry? Members of our own families who looked on Canada as a refuge, as the Promised Land?

What is it like to be a refugee?

Maybe you are Monique, who along with her family, taking only what they could carry, ran as the sounds of gunfire drowned out their voices; travelled for days without stopping till they crossed the invisible line – the border between danger and safety – the border between Guinea and their homeland Liberia.

Maybe you are Sook, whose name means “light” and you have fled with your family from North Korea to China and were met at the border by Chinese soldiers, put into a camp, and are being sent back to north Korea work camps.

Maybe you are Shukri, whose name means “thankful”, who lived with Christians, Jews and Muslims in North Iraq until the fighting got too close. They lived for 3 years in refugee camp, always hungry, huddled in tents, no school, no pencils, paper, nor toilets. Thankfully, they were allowed to immigrate to the U.S.A.

Maybe you are Mary, educated and able to take your family with you to another area of your country to a safe and secure life and lifestyle.

Or maybe you are Joseph and having heard of Herod's death, you take your family, including your young child, Jesus and bypassing your homeland of Judea, travel over 100 miles to Mary's homeland in Nazareth. It is not always easy to go home.

Canada not only provides asylum to refugees but it also works within other countries to assist in providing necessities such as health care and schooling in camps; assistance with resettlement outside of the person's homeland and in bringing peace and resettlement in the homelands.

The United Church of Canada plays an important role in alleviating the plight of refugees. Through the Refugees and Migration Program, it is committed to addressing the root causes that create refugees by

- Working for durable solutions within Canada and abroad.

- Advocating for just and fair refugee determining procedures, ensuring the right of asylum, and

- Involving ourselves in refugee sponsorship and integration of newcomers.

From 2006-2009 under the United for Peace Campaign, the UCC reached out with funds for projects in Palestine, Angola, Nicaragua, Zambia, Israel, Colombia, the Asia Pacific Regions, Korea and Canada.

At the Tatamagouche Centre, there is now an Annual 4 day Peace and Friendship Gathering to deepen understanding between First Nations and non-First Nations people in the Maritimes.

The current Initiative is "Pray, Choose, Speak for Peace in Palestine and Israel" calling members to take concrete action to support the end of Israeli occupation of Palestine territories, support of economic action focused on settlement goods and support trust building between Palestinians and Israelis.

Also through the Mission and Service Fund, as evident in today's Minute for Mission, the church provides assistance in bringing education and other services to communities.

Locally we are a generous and active church. Not only do we contribute generously to the Mission and Service Fund and to local Outreach initiatives, but we play an active role along with Wilmot and St. Paul's in the Inter-church Refugee Committee. Through this sponsorship program we must be willing and able to spring into action. Many families have been assisted in finding and furnishing residences, getting clothing suitable for our climate, getting children integrated into the school system, and the providing necessities of life. Currently the Inter-church Refugee Committee is committed to assisting 2 families who have been approved for resettlement here. One family, Rwandese is in Malawi, the other Congolese in Uganda. At some unknown time in the future, they will get unbelievably short notice to leave their refugee camp or other temporary home, board a plane and after many hours or days arrive in Fredericton.

Let us all take action to welcome them to Fredericton as Mary's family welcomed the Holy Family to Nazareth after their years as refugees in Egypt.