

If we only had the nativity story from the gospel of Luke, we would miss a lot of the historical context of Jesus' birth. If we only had a story of angels and shepherds, and baby in a manger, we would miss the story from the gospel of Matthew of the Wise Men, the Three kings from the East. And If we had sung just first and last verses of We Three Kings, we would have missed the whole story of the three gifts, gold, incense and myrrh, especially that unusual verse about myrrh, a symbol about Jesus' suffering and death. Even in the church we tend to prefer the songs that are lighthearted or about glorious light. But our Christian lectionary moves on immediately from the usual Luke birth story to the lesser known Matthew birth story, about the "Three Kings" AND ALSO the story about King Herod, the wicked power-hungry king!

It is indeed *unusual* at Christmas time for most people to think about King Herod. But sadly, the King Herod part of the story is still most relevant. King Herod had heard about a newborn king, and he feared a challenge to his power. He heard the child might have been born in Bethlehem, so he ordered all children under two years of age in and around Bethlehem to be killed. As a tyrant, he wanted to stay in power, he wanted to silence and kill off any opposition.

Good thing Joseph paid attention to his dreams, and fled with Mary and baby Jesus to Egypt. So in essence a big part of the Christmas story is that Jesus and his family were refugees; Jesus was a toddler, about 2 years old, when taken away to Egypt. The family stayed there until Herod died, so scholars say they returned to Israel when Jesus was about 4 years old, and due to another dream of Joseph, they did not stay in Judea (Bethlehem area), but fled north to Galilee and settled in Nazareth. The Holy Family was a refugee family. In Jesus own words later, he says "Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. (Mt. 8:20). And Jesus spent most of his later ministry years with no steady place to call home.

The Good News is that *Joseph* listened to angelic dreams and fled, first to Egypt and later to Galilee. The Good News is that *Jesus* was a new kind of king, and that he did live to adulthood, and became a great Teacher and Savior. Jesus was also a resister against authoritarian and military solutions to problems. So as followers of Jesus, we are called to resist oppressive ways, teaching instead the ways of dialogue and peacemaking, the ways of uplifting the poor, the stranger, the refugee, the immigrant, those who are too often pushed aside.

In a world with so much war, then and now, peacemaking seems futile. There are just too many leaders like King Herod, who rule by brutal force and instilling fear. So I will leave the Matthew Christmas story there; we can all pray and act when we are able, to turn swords into plowshares, to make peace, not war.

To lighten things up a bit, perhaps we do what King Herod was incapable of doing: listen to and appreciate those who are different from ourselves... Different in culture, different in language, different in viewpoints! Let's spend a few moments remembering unusual or different Christmases in our own lives...People have different stories!

I'll kick it off... I'll never forget our family Christmas in Spain, visiting my younger sis on her year abroad... no stores or restaurants open, almost no cars on the streets, so we retreated to our hotel and shared a few oranges and chocolates for supper. We learned the high value that Spaniards put on spending Christmas Eve at home with family!...or going out just for the midnight mass! What unusual (or memorable) customs have you learned about?

Who's next?

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Ok, I have another one... THIS YEAR... a memorable Christmas Dinner, at a Senior Living place! First of all, no one had to cook! Then, in contrast to most restaurants, we could *hear each other talk* around a nice round table in a lovely dining room. I noticed drapes and wall

to wall carpeting that also absorbed some of the sound from nearby tables. (Ever notice that new and renovated restaurants seem to have wood or vinyl floors and ceilings with industrial type metal pipes and air ducts... so much echo and noise! You often have to shout to hear someone across the table!) Then, it was also memorable, because next to the dining room was a large sitting area with a lovely *grand piano*! Naturally I had some Christmas music with me, so shortly after dinner, I went to the grand and began playing. Before long, people drifted in and sang along with famous carols. And wouldn't you know it? The most robust singing came with lighthearted songs like Rudolph, Frosty and Jingle Bells! Oh well, good to have elderly folks so young at heart!

Who's next?

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OK, one more?? Our Christmas tree growing up was unusual for our neighborhood... We were one of the only houses with a cathedral ceiling up to second floor. So my Mom and Dad filled the space, every year, with a 14 foot tree! We had to climb a step ladder to put a star on the top of the tree, and also to fasten it to the wall with a safety wire! No one seemed to mind lifting the heavy tree into place, unwrapping a hundred ornaments, nor vacuuming up all the needles afterwards! (For several years now I've enjoyed a 3 foot artificial tree, and playing the Charlie Brown jazzy version of O Christmas Tree!)

Jesus the refugee, the one with no place to lay his head, calls us to welcome the stranger who is different, to love the neighbor, to pray even for enemies. He showed us what is often called God's priority for the poor, the weak, the downtrodden. Yes, we can choose particular oppressions to resist, and particular people to help. But we know that *every person* needs to feel seen, respected, loved... so we can always begin following Jesus by listening to, understanding, and loving anyone *different* from ourselves. This is "Peace on Earth and Goodwill to all." Amen.