

Homily for the feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

December 28-29, 2019

Readings: Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14; Colossians 3: 12-21; Matthew 2: 13-15, 19-23

Preacher: Deni Mack

The Holy Family fleeing to Egypt is frightened. Two thousand years later we may overlook their fear because we know the rest of the story: King Herod did not find the child Jesus and so did not kill him; thus we may be oblivious to the trauma of Herod's threat.

As I sit with today's Gospel I see Mary and Joseph among desperate parents fleeing for their children's safety. How harrowing it must have been for all parents of children born about the time Jesus was born. I try to stay with Jesus, Mary and Joseph as I pray with this gospel and find Jesus morphing into children at our southern border today lying on cold concrete floors with no one to care for them but other children while Mary and Joseph weep for their son in some distant place where no one knows where their child has been taken. They struggle to find someone who can explain the whereabouts of their son and attend to their fear, their worry, their reality. They want to do what is best for their son. They are bereft. They pray. Their rosaries, prayer cards, photos, water, blankets, food and clothes have been confiscated. They have nothing. Far away from them, their child has nothing.

Some children have cried so long and so hard their hoarse whispers barely whimper. One observer seeing caged children's vacant eyes judged these children, "dimwitted." Most observers report seeing terror, neglect, filth, fear, yearning and hunger in those same eyes.

We ask, "What does God see?" God sees in those same children, beauty and potential; God cherishes each one. We know from many reports how badly we as a people are failing these families. We know from our faith and from the core of our being they are each the holy family torn apart by systems and powers they do not understand and feel powerless to change. Corruption seems rampant with privately owned detention centers actually turning a profit from the separation and suffering of helpless families. For some their homeland was more dangerous. A local woman religious stayed with a family in Guatemala whose older son had been murdered just months before her visit. Not surprisingly their other children sought safety in the United States or they too would have been killed. A lawyer told us after she volunteered at our border that while interviewing and assessing and advising people seeking asylum she found each applicant's words and papers "credible."

We cry for these separated families. We pray for them. We pray for ICE, for border patrols and for the people Sr. Norma Pimental has worked with for many years through Sacred Heart parish in McAllen, Texas, and Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Rio Grande. May we never lose sight of the holiness of this work and the holiness of these families in need.

The crisis at our border is a small part of a worldwide refugee crisis. Never before in recorded history have so many people had to flee their homelands for safety. In many cases it is not King Herod but climate change, political turmoil and war driving their flight. Each country is full of holy families called and gifted by God to open their hearts to the plight of those in need. Pope Francis invites each faith community to welcome and sponsor a refugee family; he sponsors five Muslim refugee families.

For those who fear newcomers I like to point to the refugee who invented the CT scan. He was banned along with all Jews during a shameful time when our border policies denied him. Due to the persistence of Ruth Gruber, who worked in the office of Interior Secretary Harold Ickes during FDR's administration, the person who became the inventor of the CT scan was permitted entry along with 800 others whose eyes looked vacant, whose potential lay hidden.

Our second reading today from the letter to the Colossians asks us to put on "heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience bearing with one another and forgiving one another." When Colossians was written, Christians worshipping in their homes sought respect from surrounding society by subscribing to standard household codes of the day including submission. Colossians 3:18 asks wives to be subordinate to their husbands and in 4:1, slaves be submissive to their masters. May God's grace help husbands and wives consciously partner and see slavery as the criminal institution it truly is. All humanity is called and gifted to be one holy family.