

## ***When It's Safe to Come Home***

**Matthew 2:13-23**

Mitri Raheb is a child of Bethlehem. His arrival didn't involve a manger, but he was born there in 1962, five years before the 1967 war broke out which began the Israeli occupation that remains to the present. In the initial days of the war, Mitri recalls his mother wanting to seek shelter in the famed Church of the Nativity—built over the traditional site of Jesus' birth—a holy place of refuge and a valued tourist destination spared by Israeli warplanes. However, his father refused to go, "saying he would rather die in his home than live as a refugee."<sup>1</sup> In Mitri's view, "When war is waged against you and your people, you don't run away, but you stay steadfast."<sup>2</sup>

That may be true and noble, but Bethlehem is also home to two of the largest Palestinian refugee camps, Aida and Dheisheh, both of which were supposed to be temporary quarters when they were set up 65 years ago. The Palestinians who live there (and for many years only in tents) are from families forced out of their homes and land when the United Nations annexed the Palestinian territory and created the modern state of Israel in 1948. In 1983, I visited the Aida camp, noting the crowded and dire conditions at the time. Fifty-seven similar camps continue to exist throughout the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. The Palestinians are a people without a legitimate country of their own, even though they and their ancestors have dwelled in this region for centuries.

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Allen, "Baptists Urged to 'Wage Peace' in Israel," *Associated Baptist Press News*, November 12, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Quoted from his sermon at the Alliance of Baptists "Waging Peace" conference, Nov. 8-10, 2013.

If being a refugee in your own land isn't degrading enough, the twenty-five foot security wall that separates Bethlehem from the state of Israel makes their daily world seem like a prison camp, preventing Palestinians from easily making their way to work, or to hospitals or shopping, or even to gain access to airports in Israel, which possesses and patrols the commercial and transportation centers throughout the region. In other words, today there is little charm or convenience or social or religious status in being a child of Bethlehem, the birthplace of Christ.

While growing up, Mitri didn't concern himself with politics or social problems. He was an earnest student, excelling in his work and eventually departing for Germany to pursue his university and graduate studies in Christian theology. He focused on sharpening his theological acumen for a career in academia, while many of his peers remained behind supporting the Palestinian Intifada. Once he completed his doctorate, though, Mitri returned to Bethlehem to serve a church, only to find that his education hadn't prepared him to lead a spiritual community

...in a setting where the sounds of gunshots outside the building would drown out his preaching, and number church members were placed in prison under "administrative detention."

At the Alliance of Baptists "Waging Peace" conference Wendy and I attended in November, Mitri remarked,

You cannot actually wage peace until you listen to the people...people on the ground, people on the grassroots level, to hear their stories, to feel their pain, to look into their eyes, to read between the lines.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Although he remained a scholar (in fact, currently the most widely published Palestinian theologian), Mitri recognized the most valuable education took place in making the world aware of the real Bethlehem that wailed with lamentation as grievously today as in the story of Christ's birth, our text for this morning.

A voice was heard in Ramah,  
wailing and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
She refused to be consoled,  
because they are no more.

Mitri was called to be the senior pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, where he continues to minister (in fact, a week ago his service was simulcast on the website of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.). He opened a guest house at the church to host visitors, inviting them to come and hear firsthand the stories of his people. The guesthouse eventually developed into the Diyar Consortium,

a group of Lutheran-based, ecumenically-oriented institutions serving the whole Palestinian community "from the womb to the tomb", with an emphasis on children, youth, women & elders.<sup>4</sup>

This consortium includes the International Center of Bethlehem, a conference and media center that provides hospitality, as well as cultural and social programs for local citizens. In addition, Mitri founded Dar al-Kalima College and Diyar Academy, educational institutions for Palestinian children from Kindergarten through the university degree level. Also in the consortium are health and wellness clinics, providing medical care and support for local families.

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<sup>4</sup> Information from the Diyar Consortium website, [www.diyar.ps](http://www.diyar.ps)

In 2004, Mitri founded the international organization, *Bright Stars of Bethlehem*, which supports the work of the consortium, raising awareness and enlisting support from around the globe for the Christian community in Palestine. He also was one of the architects of the Kairos Palestine study document from the Palestinian Christian community to the world calling for greater understanding and justice for the plight of Palestinians under Israeli occupation. He also has found time to author sixteen scholarly books—the most recent being released this coming February. He is a remarkable man, who could have remained in Germany to teach, or who could have yielded to the more violent acts of militants within the Palestinian community, but came back instead to Bethlehem to help bring healing to his land.

It's fairly evident to me that Mitri Raheb represents a hopeful and modern fulfillment of this story from Matthew, of where under the threat of death from occupying powers, Mary, Joseph, and the child, Jesus, fled Bethlehem to Egypt until it was safe to return home. In a similar Christ-like manner, Mitri returned not to escalate violence already present in the Intifada; instead he pursued justice in the most effective non-violent and pastoral means he could: by providing spiritual, educational, and physical resources for the Palestinian people, while bringing international attention to their plight. In a more modern context, I believe he has done what Jesus would have done. Thus, with his example, this difficult Matthean text that seems so harsh, cruel, and out of place with the overall character of the Christmas story can be interpreted more positively and redemptively in a modern context. Both Mitri and Jesus are children of Bethlehem, coming back—one from Egypt, the other from

Germany—to bring hope to their people under occupation, especially to the most vulnerable among them.

That being said, as I've reflected on this passage over the past week, it's not just in the Middle East where a text like this has meaning. Anywhere people are not free, this story has a setting. It's clear, Matthew wrote his plotline with many parallels to the Exodus story itself: the drama of a ruler's terror, the death threats he issued, his jealousy over the birth of a potential rival, the ruthlessness Herod displayed in massacring every male child two years old and younger, and Joseph and Mary having to wait out the period in exile until it was safe to come home. All of this was intentional to bring to his audience the significance of who Jesus was in the overall context and narrative of Israel, as one who came up out of the land of the Pharaohs to deliver his people—much like Moses and like his namesake, Joshua.

Still, aside from that, what also is relevant to so many are the parallels people today make to living with any kind of abuse and terror, a painful emotional reality evident in the empty places that characterize the Christmas holiday. As we know, even in our own communities there are homes where not everyone in the family was welcomed back—sons and daughters estranged from their parents, children of divorce missing the presence of one of the parents, gay children rejected by the ones who once provided a welcoming embrace, households where addictions of one type or another have made family gatherings a nightmare to behold—in other words, all the human dramas we see, or hear about, or witness and experience

firsthand, where the survival instinct in you makes you want to flee or avoid it all together.

I truly believe there were many this past week who would not, could not, or should not come back home until it was safe for them to do so. For all of the sentimentality we attach to this time of year, there are those who find it painfully difficult to get through this densely emotional period—not only for the memories of the past, but for what they fear will yet happen during the holidays. It's haunting not to be safe in the place you were born. Jesus' own painful story includes them as well.

But simply running away or avoiding the setting doesn't bring a sense of peace, either. Matthew doesn't comment on this, but one would assume it was (and is) not easy to live as a refugee away from your homeland. Exile is not a desired vacation; one might find temporary shelter and safety, but it does not make you well as a person. You are not in the place of your choosing. You are constantly reminded and haunted of the vulnerable condition of your life. You are a person without a natural sense of identity for where you belong—without a home and without a place to be free to be yourself.

If all our prayers were answered in the way we wish them to be, something would occur that would stop the Herods of our world from terrorizing others. We would hope for a Saul-like Damascus Road-type transformation, where the Herods we know would fall to their knees and recognize their terrible nature and seek forgiveness for all the damage they've done.

If Herod had realized the error of his ways, perhaps Jesus and his family could have returned home to Bethlehem much earlier. But,

of course, that's not the way the story played out. People like Herod are not apt to change; they go to their grave as mean-spirited and miserable as they were throughout life. The terror doesn't cease until they take their last breath on earth. So as the story unfolds, Jesus and his family had to remain in exile until Herod died and was no longer a threat. This often plays out in many people's lives; they are not free from the terror until "Herod" no longer has control over them. They can't return until it's safe to come home. That may take a very long time.

Even then, if you are like Jesus, you don't get to go back to the place of your birth. You are left to make a new home elsewhere. That also is how the story often goes. Jesus and his family, according to Matthew, didn't return to Bethlehem; the terror and the hatred didn't go away. If they had returned to the place of his birth, the weeping and wailing would start up all over again. So instead, they left Egypt only to keep on going until they made their new home in Nazareth. Many times, that's all one can do. You prevent further "bloodshed" by creating a new home elsewhere and embracing it as your own choice to do so. That's what happened with Jesus. Though he was born in Bethlehem, he was always known as *Jesus of Nazareth*. There are those like Jesus for whom "Nazareth" is the safest and most beneficial place to call home—a place to create a sense of lasting identity.

As you can see, this Christmas text provokes many storylines that ring true in the human drama we call life. Oddly enough, most people don't include this part of the narrative in their annual retelling of Jesus' birth. But it's in there, just like it is in many a life. The harshness of life can never be forgotten or hidden even in a season so

sweet as Christmas. If this finds relevance and meaning in your own life, let it speak to you with a pastoral voice. Let Jesus' story acknowledge the difficulty and hardship in your own, the evil and the lasting harm that is often done even among those who should be our kin. Then, allow it to guide you, spiritually and emotionally, to your safe place, so that you can move forward without being haunted by the past or by the barriers that loom around you.

One final note, the story of Mitri Raheb, this child of Bethlehem, is not over for us. He will be visiting Noank in late March sharing his message and his most recent book, *Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible Through Palestinian Eyes*. We will be hosting him in support of the challenging and important ministry he leads for the sake of his Palestinian people. He is among the fortunate; he can return to the place of his birth and help bring healing to his own. But he knows what it's like for so many who cannot and will not return to Palestine, the land of their birth.

Let us remember all of those who carry a similar emptiness and heartache in this season—who must make their home elsewhere because of circumstances beyond their control, away from those who once had given them life and the hope and promise that comes with every birth. May they find a good place to be—a place of genuine belonging—and may it always be a safe haven from terror and harm.

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