

A week before Christmas, Governor Lee announced the state of Tennessee would continue to welcome refugees. Some of the governor's Republican colleagues in the Legislature had hoped, as two of them remarked, that he would “hit the pause button” on refugee resettlement. But in his election campaign, Lee had explained that his commitment to Christianity was very important to him. Further, he had worked in several countries to help resettle refugees, so this concern was not new. The governor received hundreds of letters from evangelical Christians encouraging him to help refugees. On December 18, he announced he would continue these efforts.

Today's Gospel tells us the story of how the Holy Family - Joseph, Mary, and their toddler Jesus - became refugees. They went to Egypt because Joseph was warned in a dream that King Herod was planning to search for Jesus to kill him.

What a change this is from Christmas Eve when Bishop Gordy reminded us that Jesus is here to stay! Today we learn that Jesus may be staying with us, but he sure didn't stay long in Bethlehem.

On Christmas Eve, we heard how shepherds in the fields were watching over their flocks by night. We heard angels proclaim “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom God favors!” But now we hear about the Holy Family sneaking away to Egypt in the night. Suddenly instead of glory, peace, and goodwill, we hear of fear and terror in the night. Our text tells us that when King Herod realized he had been tricked he had all the children around Bethlehem under the age of two killed. It was a cruel world back then - even more cruel than it is today.

When Susan and I visited Israel and the West Bank last February, if I learned anything new about the Holy Land, it was about the tremendous influence of Herod the Great. We saw an aqueduct that Herod built which carried fresh water along the beach beside the Mediterranean Sea. In 22 BCE just south of there, Herod built his

provincial capitol, Caesarea Maritima. We visited the ruins of Herod's residence and the government buildings. This was where a hearing for Paul was held about 80 years later: he appealed to Caesar, and was sent to Rome. Right beside the Sea was a large rectangular area. The tour guide told us this was Herod's swimming pool. The guide said that even though we may think of David as Israel's greatest king, Herod actually was the greatest and exerted the widest influence. His building projects are evidence of this. Herod's masterwork was completely overhauling and expanding the temple in Jerusalem.

Whether Herod slaughtered the babies around Bethlehem or not, such a portrayal of the man may have been suggested because Herod accused one of his ten wives and three of his sons of trying to kill him and had them executed. After Herod's death, his kingdom was divided among three of his surviving children, two sons and a daughter.

Our final stop on our tour of the Holy Land was to a place called Herodium. I had never heard of Herodium, but the view from it was the most stunning of the trip. It overlooks Bethlehem to the west, Jerusalem to the north, and the Jordan Valley, including the Dead Sea to the east and south. Herodium is the highest point in the area. The story goes that Herod wanted a palace and a fortress a little distance from Jerusalem from where he could keep an eye on the city. He was told that there was no place like that since Jerusalem was built on the highest elevation in the area. Herod said, "Well then, build a place like that." So beginning around 25 BCE to fulfill Herod's order, his architects and engineers had dirt hauled up an existing mountain and built a conical shaped extension on top of it. This was just three miles southeast of Bethlehem and seven and a half miles south of Jerusalem. Herodium is nearly 2600 feet above sea level. The Dead Sea, the lowest point on Earth at 1400 feet below sea level, is 4000 feet below Herodium.

Looking about half a mile downhill on the north slope of Herodium, we saw another large rectangular structure - yet another swimming pool. Here, as the Jewish historian Josephus writes, water was brought in at considerable expense, for this is a high desert area. We noticed a

circle made of stones inside the swimming pool, and our tour guide asked us to guess what it was. Whatever guesses we made were wrong. This, it turned out, was Herod's swim-up bar. Two thousand years ago, Herod lived large!

Our tour guide said he believed Herod's encounter with the wise men when they came looking for the Christ child occurred here rather than in Jerusalem. Coming up from the south and the east, Herodium would have presented the first opportunity to stop and ask for directions since Jerusalem is seven and a half miles farther north and beyond Bethlehem.

In the year 614, Persians captured Palestine and destroyed all the churches and monasteries, except for Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity. Nearly three centuries earlier, it had been built over the cave in which Jesus was believed to have been born. The Persians left the church alone because of a mosaic depicting the magi dressed in the clothing of Persian priests.

The story of the toddler Jesus and his parents seeking shelter in Egypt is a reminder that the Hebrews came out of Egypt themselves about 12 centuries earlier. As today's Gospel tells us, after Herod's death, the Holy Family left Egypt to return to their homeland. Jesus would grow up in the north, in Galilee, in the city of Nazareth. According to the Gospel of Luke, this also is where Mary was from, where the angel Gabriel told her she would become the mother of God's Son, and where Jesus was conceived. There's so much richness in these stories, a richness that I found enhanced by visiting these places I had heard about since I was a child.

During our lives, we continue to change. One of the biggest periods of change is often adolescence. When I was a teenager, for a while I tried to be thoroughly logical, like Mr. Spock in Star Trek. Maybe that history of emotional suppression explains why my emotions now sometimes bubble to the surface. I struggle at times to keep them in check. I can be blindsided by strong feelings. It happened on Christmas Eve, as we processed into the church singing "Oh come, all ye faithful, joyful and

triumphant, oh come ye, oh come ye to Bethlehem!” It struck me that this year, I had done that - I actually had come to Bethlehem. I had touched the spot where tradition says Jesus was born in that cave in the Church of the Nativity.

When Jesus was a toddler, he and his family became refugees in Egypt where his ancestors once had been slaves. For many centuries before that, Jews were taught to care for strangers in their midst, remembering that they once were aliens. This is the heritage not only of Jews, but also of Christians and Muslims. Having many things in common, we continue to work to build bridges of understanding.

On Christmas Eve, Bishop Gordy talked about all the ways in which we are divided and at odds with one another. Certainly there will be more of that in the year ahead since 2020 is an election year. Maybe we can make a New Year’s resolution to strive for unity and understanding rather than division, to try with more patience to work together.

As the Catholic priest Richard Rohr wrote in his online Christmas Eve meditation, perhaps that was something that St. Francis realized. Rohr says Francis is largely responsible for the festival of Christmas as we observe it today. Up until then, Easter was the only major festival of the church year. Francis thought that we didn’t need to wait for Holy Week to celebrate God’s love for us. About 800 years ago, Francis is reputed to have created the first live outdoor nativity scene.

The world was a rough place when Jesus was born. It still is. We need to build on the vision scripture gives us, proclaiming God’s love for the world - for everyone and everything in it. Reverence for life, as Albert Schweitzer taught, needs to be a key value and motivator for us.

As we begin 2020, we pray that our vision will be 20/20: that we will be guided by love, just as surely as Christ loves us.