

Church of refugees: Into Egypt—and Manhattan

by [Heidi Neumark](#) in the [January 13, 2004](#) issue

My installation as pastor at a Manhattan congregation began with a festive outdoor procession weaving through public housing projects and then looping around to the parking lot near the pricey apartments and condos on the other side of the street. We wanted the procession to declare our commitment to both sides of the street. In addition to a long line of people of every age and hue, we had drums, banners and balloons to draw attention to our presence.

Fifteen-month-old Lucy enjoyed the procession from the comfort of her stroller. “Might Lucy have a purple balloon?” her mother Virginia asked. “Of course!” The balloon was tied to the stroller and Lucy clutched the string. A day later, Virginia explained the request. Lucy was adopted from China. When she was an infant, her birth mother left her on the side of a road. It was a well-traveled road near an orphanage, which might indicate something of the mother’s hopes for her daughter. And there was one other detail, the only other known detail of Lucy and her birth mother. Before walking away, the mother had swaddled her baby girl in a quilted jacketwrap—and it was purple.

Might Lucy have a purple balloon? Virginia wants the color purple to be a special part of Lucy’s life, a sign of connection to her birth mother. Virginia wants to recognize and honor the truth that while Lucy now has a future here, she comes with a past, a history and a heritage that is precious, valued and deeply colored with love’s heartbreak and hope.

I thought of Lucy this year in reading the story of Mary and Joseph and their flight into Egypt with Jesus to escape Herod’s death squads who were targeting baby boys. Like so many others, Lucy was born as a baby at risk in a nation where infant girls have been left to die or killed outright because of strict population control and preference for male heirs. When I visited India, the fate of girls became clear in the signs on storefront offices advertising the availability of sonograms on almost every

block. In many areas, these seedy, sonogram emporiums are as ubiquitous as bodegas in the Bronx. Their sole purpose is to weed out the girls. Ninety-nine percent of abortions in India eliminate girls. In China, the figure is comparable.

Like Joseph and Mary, Lucy's parents (or was it just her mother?) prepared the baby for flight. Her mother swaddled her in purple and left her to be borne away.

As I look around my new congregation, it strikes me that we are all on this flight together. In the first communion class, a lithe girl with eyes as compelling as any Ethiopian icon's is here with her family from Eritrea, a place battered by war, where politics are not conducive to the health of children. On Sunday, with snow mounting outside, we gather at the font brimming with water warm as the tropics and baptize a family of girls from Santo Domingo. The godparents are missing, several border-crossings away. It's hard to imagine that public schools in our poorer, urban areas and low-wage jobs without benefits have become the holy grail for these families, but it is true. Some Mexican parents arrive without their children, preparing the way and then sending money to strangers who are entrusted with bringing the children here on a dangerous flight.

A new parishioner overhears a conversation about baptism and tells me, "I want to be rebaptized. I want to start my life over. I don't like my past life." I've heard this before, but never with such a stark, world-weary tone coming from a 13-year-old girl. Serena has embarked on her own flight, a refugee from a home that has not felt safe for a long time. Church is a reprieve, a retreat, a place for vulnerable, budding life to unfold. Economic refugees from south of our border fill the church basement to study English several nights a week. For some of the women, it has become the only path of escape from abuse at home, their only time alone, the only time they can do something for themselves. Who would have guessed? It's not just English class, it's an oasis in Egypt.

We all come as refugees on this flight, seeking sanctuary, a warm touch, communion. Our Lady of Guadalupe beckons her children while the songs alternate between Bach and mariachi guitars. One week, the first communion class made the bread, sweet with honey. Another week, we communed with *ingera*, the sour, spongy bread that is a staple in Eritrea and Ethiopia. You can't break off pieces, you have to tear them—scraps of hope, remnants of cherished memory.

“This is my body, given for you,” Jesus said—bread for the journey from the one who was carried on a donkey, a desperate trip in the dead of night. The same one who came back and entered the city again on a donkey, no longer fleeing but coming to face the powers, to declare his commitment to both sides of the street.

We are entering Epiphany, the season of light for the world. At some point, we pray, our flight becomes a procession of hope toward a city that sustains and treasures the life of all her refugees. As we prepare our sanctuary for the Epiphany season, we will dress the altar in multicolored ribbons. And yes, Virginia, one of the ribbons will be purple.