

The light of hope for refugees (Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20)

Mary and Joseph must have felt dejected and homeless.

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While Matthew presents royal Magi from the East, bringing gifts to the Christ child, Luke features angels appearing to shepherds in the field, calling them to attend the Holy Family in Bethlehem.

Note the complementarity of the presentations. Matthew's story echoes the international entourage of the Queen of Sheba bringing gifts to King Solomon (1 Kings 10; 2 Chron. 9); and, like Amos among the shepherds, common folk also attest to the arrival of the Christ child. Whether or not Luke was aware of Matthew's story, his presentation certainly rounds out the account in socio-economic terms.

As we think of nativity scenes, though, we tend to romanticize the Holy Family, surrounded by animals and angels, in a comfortable stable. We might even think of shepherds as children dressed in bathrobes, as in our church pageants, but things probably weren't quite that rosy.

Mary and Joseph probably had more in common with today's refugees, forced by a foreign government to travel a hundred miles in the winter for a census. All while Mary was about to give birth.

When they arrived at Bethlehem, where the inns and guesthouses were full, they must have felt dejected and homeless. Nonetheless, the promise of Isaiah was true for them, as it is for others throughout time: “The people who walked in darkness / have seen a great light; / those who lived in a land of deep darkness— / on them light has shined.”

Not only did Israel’s God shine a great light of hope among refugees in strange lands, but the shepherds near Bethlehem were abruptly startled by an angel of the Lord—surrounded by glory—sending them into town to behold Israel’s Savior-Messiah.

As we reflect upon the meaning of Christmas for us this year, we’re reminded that the God of exiles, refugees, and migrants still shines light amidst today’s present darkness.

Peace on earth is what the Christ child came to bring, and God’s favor extends beyond human bounds and measures.

[The nativity is portrayed beautifully by Donald Jackson in his “Birth of Christ” artwork](#), from volume 6 of the *Saint John’s Bible*. Note the way the illumination from above and the celebrating angels form the shape of the cross, and how the sheep by the manger is presented as a sacrificial ram.

For exiles and displaced travelers, Jesus is present as a delivering hope. For common laborers and animal tenders in the field, glorious choruses of angels appear. And for the divisions and challenges of our day, Christ is a Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.