Opinion
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U.S. Army soldiers at the Dulles Expo Center in Chantilly, Va., assist Afghanistan families as th

U.S. Army soldiers at the Dulles Expo Center in Chantilly, Va., assist Afghanistan families as they depart an evacuees' processing center Aug. 25. (CNS/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)



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In the Christmas season we tend to focus on the account of Jesus' birth as found in the Gospel of Luke. We know the heart-warming story from the Annunciation to the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, followed by the birth of Jesus in a stable but visited by angels and shepherds. It is nourishment for cold winter's night.

But this year, I believe that we should spend our time reading the more challenging account in the Gospel of Matthew. As I ponder the first chapter of Matthew, I see that this is a political story in a dangerous time. It is a story to be considered anew today.

Matthew starts with the genealogy of Jesus to give him political credentials being of the royal house of David. This leads directly to a Gospel of struggle. We glimpse Joseph struggling to accept Mary and Jesus as his own. He is told, "Do not be afraid." This is followed by the confirmation that Jesus is "Emmanuel," which is "God with

us."

Matthew follows this with one verse about the birth of Jesus and then launches into the political story of the Magi coming to do homage to this child in a stable. The Magi stir up the political fear of the ruler Herod. Herod's insecurity causes him to seek to destroy this child. The Magi are warned in a dream not to return to Herod, but to return by another route. The political stakes are high.

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Then Joseph is warned in a dream to take Mary and the baby and flee into Egypt because of the political danger of an insecure Herod. The young family flees political violence and finds shelter in a foreign land.

Meditating on the political intrigue led me think of today's reality as the United States struggles to provide a safe haven for thousands of Afghans and their families. These families are fleeing a regime that wants to harm anyone who supported the NATO allies in building a new Afghanistan. Violence and political turmoil abound in this country, as the Taliban in their insecurity seek revenge and dominance. It is easy to see a parallel with the actions of Herod.

But for us in the United States, we are called to ponder the reality of creating a safe haven for those who are fleeing. In October, I got to work at one of the military bases welcoming Afghan families. We had between 4,000 and 5,000 "guests" who were being processed for settlement in the United States. These families had fled with the clothes on their backs and a few things that they could carry. Forty-three percent of our guests were children under 13. This, I am told, is true of the other bases as well. We had at least 60 pregnant women in the camp. We had thousands of Holy Families seeking safety so that the divine might be able to inhabit their lives with peace.

Some of the children had a lot of experience with education, but others did not. Some had some knowledge of English, but most did not. Some of the men had fled alone and were trying desperately to get their families out of impossible situations. One man recounted that his family still in Afghanistan had been approached by the Taliban. They offered their protection in exchange for their 14-year-old daughter for their local Taliban leader. The family immediately went into hiding to try to protect their child and were desperately trying to get exit visas to the United States.

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Gradually, families are being settled all over the United States. It is the biggest, quickest relocation of families ever. It is a huge task. Local Catholic Charities, Lutheran Family Services, local Afghan Americans and myriad others are scrambling to find housing and support for these families. Each Afghan family can ask for a certain placement, but one of the challenges is that the places in the United States that they have heard of are where they have relatives and friends. These places are already crowded and housing scarce.

A family who was told by one of the relocation staff to pick a destination other than California as their first choice. They had no idea what to choose because the only people they know in our country are in the San Francisco Bay Area. As I talked with them, I discovered how challenging it is for these newcomers to adjust to the size of our country. Afghanistan is the same size as Texas.

As we talked, I suggested that the family might find Oregon a good place to go because it could be just a day's drive to the Bay Area where their family settled. But how can families make a choice when there is no real frame of reference? There is no angel coming in a dream to say: Flee to Egypt … or Portland … or Wichita.

In this Christmas season, we are called to welcome these fleeing families. We are called to help them find security in the midst of their dislocation and struggle. Let us use our imaginations to figure out how we can help families, young men who had to leave families behind, worried their elders.

We are called this Christmas season to live in the midst of the political story of Matthew's Gospel. It is we who are called to make a safe place for holy families seeking security in a turbulent political time. We are the called to be the political actors in Matthew's Gospel. This is how we will know that Emmanuel is indeed with us this Christmas season.

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