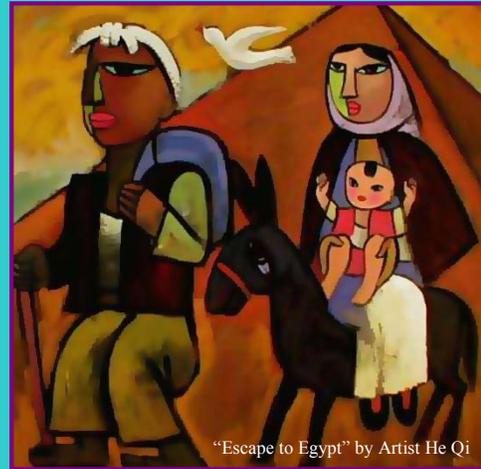


Understanding Family Detention:

Remembering Jesus' Escape for Safety, Building Solidarity with Fleeing Families



Scripture, Matthew 2:7, 13-16:

The three kings, having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod...returned to their country by another route....When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

Reflection:

The nights in Bethlehem around the Holy Family did not stay silent for long—and there was little chance for the young family to enjoy the gifts selected and carried so carefully by the magi over a great distance. In modern terms, there was barely time for them to worship and take a “selfie” at the stable before a stark change of plans enveloped them—as Herod’s bitterness and anger turned starlight and joy into darkness and fear. Of course, it was not only the Wise Men who scurried away quickly to hide from Herod. The Holy Family themselves departed under cover, through a dangerous route and into the unknown Egyptian desert. Due to Herod’s threat of death, they left their home country, no doubt fearing they would never be able to return.

The necessity of their escape to avoid danger and their fearful movement along a precarious path parallels the flight of tens of thousands of Central Americans who have left Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador in recent years. Like Jesus’ family, their prayer is to find security and hope in their exodus. Are we protecting them as they arrive?

Background of Family Detention—The U.S. government detains more than 34,000 individuals each day who then face removal (or deportation) proceedings to determine whether they can lawfully remain in the U.S. Detainees include asylum seekers, refugees, torture survivors, undocumented migrants, victims of human trafficking, long-term lawful permanent residents, and parents of children who are U.S. citizens. Due to a stark increase in families fleeing violence in Central America and seeking protection, **the federal government has placed thousands of mothers, babies, and children in detention facilities.** These families are kept in jail-like conditions while they wait for their court cases to be determined.

A previous family detention center, opened in 2006 and called the T. Don Hutto Detention Facility in Texas, was closed to families in 2009 due to substandard conditions and due process violations. Mothers and children have been held over the past two years in three centers, located in remote areas of Dilley and Karnes City, TX, and Berks County, PA. A report from Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service & Women’s Refugee Commission documents most of the families detained (such as 98% at the Karnes facility) are seeking protection; **fleeing violence, domestic abuse, & dangerous gang-related activity.** Infants, pregnant women, and toddlers are detained in jail-like conditions, putting them at risk of permanent psychological trauma. More than 50% of the children are 6 years or younger.

Story of a Detained Mom and Daughters—Isabella and her daughters Maria (10) and Cynthia (4) left San Pedro de Sula, Honduras after Isabella’s husband was killed along with his two passengers while transporting them in his taxi to the airport. The murderers were drug gangsters. Two months later, Isabella sold her husband’s taxi in fear, and paid the money to a “coyote” who promised to help her cross the border. Once in the U.S., the coyote fled—and the mother and daughters were caught, and have suffered in detention since. She and her family were placed in a family detention center in Artesia, N.M., which was later closed amid complaints of human rights violations. Then Isabella and her daughters were moved to Karnes City, and again to the center in Dilley. (Go to: <http://www.detentionwatchnetwork.org/ExposeAndClose> to learn more).

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Why are Families Detained?

“Family Detention” is part of an Administration strategy to ensure that Central American refugees would feel deterred from escaping their homeland to come to the U.S. to find protection and seek asylum. The asylum process requires each person who claims a fear of return to her country must be given a credible fear interview to evaluate if the claim has validity. Then she must appear in asylum court to determine whether she will remain in the United States as an asylee or be deported.

Detention is intended for people who are a security threat or who might flee the state. However, these families do not pose a security or flight risk—but are rather in the legal process of seeking asylum. Families are detained unnecessarily without due consideration for placement in an alternative to detention. Such alternatives are generally far more humane and less expensive than family detention in large scale facilities.

What is a Family Residential Center Like?



credit: Katharina Obser — **The Karnes City center** built to 530 beds in 2015. Located an hour from the closest city, family efforts to receive adequate legal support are challenging. The facility is operated by the private prison company Geo Group.



The Berks County center is run by the County. In Oct. 2015, the PA. DHS denied the center's request to double its capacity to 192 persons.

Advocacy groups like Human Rights First have alleged the center is damaging to families. Its current license is set to expire in Feb. 2016, though in early 2016, families continued to be transferred to Berks

from Dilley and Karnes. (Photo of faith advocates seeking to close the center in July, 2016.)

What Has Been the Largest Family Center? **The South Texas Family Residential Center**



opened as a family detention facility in Dec., 2014, and quickly grew to a capacity to detain 2,400 in 2015. The facility is in Dilley, Texas—over 70 miles from San Antonio, Texas; the nearest major city. It is operated by a private prison company, the Corrections Corporation of America, and in 2015 was the site of multiple prayer vigils, demonstrations, and legislators' visits. Advocates have de-

cried the refugees being locked up while seeking protection. Thus far in 2016, women and children caught in ICE raids have been sent back to Dilley, where advocates have been successful in helping some families be granted stays of deportation. (Photo of faith prayer vigil outside Dilley, April 2015.)

How Can People of Faith Help Families?

*Download and read the “Locking Up FamilyValues, Again” report from Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service and Women’s Refugee Commission, found at: lirs.org.)

*Follow faith and advocate efforts to End Family Detention. Contact your denomination’s office, and find additional resources and calls to action at: detentionwatchnetwork.org.

*Write to children and families in detention through the Church World Service “Angel to Angel” program. See information at: <http://www.interfaithimmigration.org/2014/03/04/religious-holiday-resources/>, and click on “Angel to Angel” in English or Spanish for sample letters.

Prayer: God, as we remember the escape of Jesus’ family for safety this Epiphany, link our minds in understanding, open our hearts to compassion, and direct our feet in action for children and mothers detained. Change their captivity to liberty, replace their fear with fortitude, and turn their suffering in custody into a hopefulness for humane and community centered care. AMEN.

Go to: <http://www.interfaithimmigration.org> for this and other “Holy Days & Holidays Resources” from the Interfaith Immigration Coalition. Thanks to all contributors to this project: Church World Service, Lutheran Immigration & Refugee Service, & Disciples Refugee & Immigration Ministries. (1/12/2016)