

Feast of the Holy Family

*SMA
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I don't think any of us fail to appreciate the peacefulness, stillness, and love that we experience in the Christmas season. We may feel supersaturated with Christmas music from Halloween until Christmas day, but all of that and the business of the season does not succeed in making us lose sight of what we really desire to possess for one another and for ourselves, and for the world, at this time and always. And that, quite simply, is peace. It is what the angels announced: "Peace to people of good will." Our greeting cards, at least the religious ones, depict that peace in scenes of the infant with his parents, poor but somehow secure. "The world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing." This peace is infused with a sense of abiding love.

But, when we look deeper, the gospel passages about Jesus and his family also paint a troubling picture of fear. Even at the beginning of his life, there are some hints of what this prince of peace will face. One of the wisemen, for instance, brings a strange gift of myrrh to the family. Myrrh

was an aromatic spice used in burial services. Darkly, Herod seeks the life of the child and is busy slaughtering other children who might threaten his reign. For the family, there is need to flee; to be uprooted and leave everything they know. Already Mary and Joseph had been on long roads because of greater powers (Rome), ordering them to move about for the census that was to be taken. Now, because of Herod, they must flee to Egypt, to a foreign country, where they know not the language, or the people, or the customs, or the laws; where they have no foreseeable means of support. In a word, they are refugees.

This story of flight is one that we recognize. Millions upon millions have known it, and millions it experience today. Men, women, and children flee from war in Africa and Asia, or from danger in Central America. Other millions leave everything familiar in order to seek a job that will allow them, their spouses, and their children at least to live--maybe even to prosper. They all are exposed to countless dangers from marauders, storms at sea and on land, tricksters who betray them after taking their money, people in their new land who fear them, or reject

their otherness, or take advantage of them for their own purposes.

Today, we can see the feast of the Holy Family not only as a peaceful scene on a Christmas card. We can think of it as a commemoration, a memorial, a prayer, for the millions of families who are tossed about by hostile forces far larger than themselves. It is a commemoration of the vulnerable. Made vulnerable by war, hatred, greed, or whatever powers drive families, just like the Holy Family, to seek refuge in whatever place they in their desperation can find. Our feast tells us: God is with these people. He himself, in his Son, is in the midst of their vulnerability, poverty, and need. He is Emmanuel: God with us, a vulnerable infant with his frightened and endangered parents.

Our Christmas carols are not always blind to such dark realities of the world. When we go beyond the first verse or two, we sometimes encounter a surprise. Here are some verses that recently struck me and surprised me farther down in the lyrics of "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" (1849):

We all know the first part:

**It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth
With news of joy foretold,
"Peace on the earth, good will to men
From heaven's all gracious King."
The world in solemn stillness lay,
To hear the angels sing.**

But this part I did not know:

**Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the Angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man at war with man hears not
The love-song which they bring;**

**O ye, beneath life's crushing load
Whose forms are bending low,**

**Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow;
O rest beside the weary road
And hear the angels sing.**

**The carol ends with joy, proclaiming that Christ will bring
to fulfillment what has begun in the stable amid the Holy
Family:**

**For lo! the days are hastening on,
By prophets seen of old,
When with the ever-circling years
Shall come the time foretold,
When the new heaven and earth shall own
The Prince of Peace their King,
And the whole world send back the song
Which now the angels sing.**

**Let us pray in joyful thanksgiving that Christ is
drawing us and all the world into that Kingdom which has
begun in Him. Let us also pray the God will make us agents
of God's peace now to one another and the world.**

