

Real Christmas

DAVE BAST

Getting through Christmas for another year is a relief to many people; not just because of the busyness and stress of the season. For a lot of folks, this is a time of year when loneliness and pain and sorrow seem to be magnified. We feel loss or separation more acutely, but this has always been true. It is part of the very first Christmas story – part of it that we tend not to tell, but today that is the part we want to focus on, so stay tuned.

BOB HEERSPINK

From ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. Hey, Bob; have you put all your Christmas music away yet?

BOB HEERSPINK

Oh, yes.

DAVE BAST

We tend to listen to it for like six weeks ahead of time, and then not at all afterwards.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, the day after Christmas I am ready to be done with it.

DAVE BAST

To move on.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

But I want you to listen to one more Christmas carol. It is a very ancient one. It is called *The Coventry Carol*, and it has a very unusual theme. It is not about the angels and the wise men and the shepherds, but take a listen to this:

Lyrics - The Coventry Carol:

Lully, lullay, thou little tiny child,

Bye bye, lully, lullay.

Lullay, thou little tiny child,

Bye bye, lully, lullay.

O sisters too, how may we do

For to preserve this day

This poor youngling for whom we sing,

"Bye bye, lully, lullay"?

Herod the king, in his raging,

*Chargèd he hath this day
His men of might in his own sight
All children young to slay.
That woe is me, poor child, for thee
And ever mourn and say
For thy parting nor say nor sing,
“Bye bye, lully, lullay.”
Lullay thou little tiny child
Bye bye, lully, lullay.
Lullay thou little tiny child
Bye bye lully, lullay.*

BOB HEERSPINK

Now there is a song you don't hear very often on the radio. I mean, the message of that song – that carol...

DAVE BAST

You might hear it, but you won't hear those verses usually: Herod the king in his raging...

BOB HEERSPINK

The song has been cleaned up, as it were, for our understanding what Christmas is supposed to be all about, because those are themes that just don't fit our typical understanding of a fairytale Christmas.

DAVE BAST

But it is part of the story; it is right there in Matthew Chapter 2.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and it is there to really help us understand what Christmas is all about and where Christmas is going to go. Let me read the story from Matthew 2:

¹³Now when the wise men had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the Child and his mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the Child to destroy him. ¹⁴And he rose and took the Child and his mother by night ¹⁵and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the Prophet, “Out of Egypt have I called my Son.” ¹⁶Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he has ascertained from the wise men. ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation. Rachel weeping for her children. She refused to be consoled because they were no more.”

DAVE BAST

So the wise men have barely marched off the page when here come Herod's storm troopers swinging their swords and killing the little baby boys of Bethlehem and that whole region. Genocide as part of the Christmas story!

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, Herod is so angry because his plans have been foiled. He intended to go in, having identified through the wise men the newborn King, he was going to eliminate this threat to his throne, and instead God intervenes. He sends the wise men back by another route and Herod is in a situation where he decides to just swing the axe at any child that comes into reach.

DAVE BAST

Yes but, your choice of words, Bob, can I... God intervenes; saves his Son. What about the other kids, you know? Here we are confronted again with the same problem over and over. The problem of why does God

allow these kinds of things to happen?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, because there is so much suffering; in fact, the passage really goes right back in time and pictures all these weeping mothers as sharing in the grief that was experienced at the time of the Babylonian captivity.

DAVE BAST

Those words from Jeremiah that Matthew quotes, and he mentions Rachel, who died in childbirth at the site of Bethlehem.

BOB HEERSPINK

That is right; more sorrow.

DAVE BAST

That is why Bethlehem was even founded there; so all of this sadness, and it is woven into the story that we tend to sentimentalize – the Christmas story.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, it really challenges the way we celebrate Christmas, where we really have created a fairytale story. Christmas is about everyone loving each other, caring for each other, and even though that is not really true, people go through their own struggles with depression sometimes because they think everybody is happy at this time of year but them. We have created this fairytale because this is the way we want life to be, but it is not the way life is, and it isn't the way it was at the first Christmas.

DAVE BAST

And let's recognize as well that the Holy Family did not have a very easy time of it, because, yes, they are directed to flee – Joseph is given this message from God – and so they pack up and they trek down to Egypt, across the Sinai Desert, a very difficult time, but essentially they become homeless refugees; and this, too, is part of the story.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I think, Dave, it would be interesting to ask what that experience is like. We have someone who is going to be joining us in a few minutes...

DAVE BAST

Well, that is exactly right, yes. We thought it might be an interesting thing here at Christmastime to talk to a refugee, since Jesus started out life as a refugee, and just explore that experience with Dhan, our friend who is going to be joining us just after this break.

Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Dave, right before the break we were talking about the story of Jesus and the Holy Family fleeing down to Egypt, and really becoming refugees there; going into Egypt and getting away from the threat of Herod. You know, it is such an irony, I find, that here is Egypt, where the Israelites came out of, now it becomes the place of refuge for them.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it is the house of bondage, as I recall, in the Old Testament – the house of slavery; and now they go there to find safekeeping, but as refugees, homeless. What that must have been like.

BOB HEERSPINK

That is a chapter in Jesus' life and the life of his family that we sometimes don't think about. What was it like to go now to this strange land and really leave home behind?

DAVE BAST

Well, today there are 41.2 million refugees in the world, and there are 12 million stateless people. I did a little research online... people living without citizenship rights. Just to imagine not being able to travel freely, not being able to feel secure, that you won't be kicked out of the place where you are living; some of that uncertainty is the lot of refugees in the world today. We have a person with us who knows quite a bit about that; both someone who works with refugees in his daily job, and who has experienced that himself; Dhan, welcome to our program.

DHAN KHATIWODA

Thank you very much.

DAVE BAST

I would like to say your full name, but I think I would mess it up. You say it for me, please.

DHAN KHATIWODA

Okay; my full name is Dhan Khatiwoda.

DAVE BAST

Dhan Khatiwoda.

DHAN KHATIWODA

Right.

DAVE BAST

Thank you very much; and you are from the country of Bhutan. It is a very small country. A lot of people don't know where it is, but originally that is where you were born.

DHAN KHATIWODA

Yes; I was born in Bhutan, and Bhutan actually is a country between China and India; toward the north we have China and toward the south it is India. It is a very small, landlocked country, and as far as I remember, I was 16 years old when I had to flee my country. There was no certain reason why we had to be thrown out of the country, but I actually became a refugee. It was a result of ethnic cleansing. The government of Bhutan wanted only one particular group of people to live in the country, and threw the rest of them out of the country; and talking about Christianity a little bit, Bhutan is a country where Christianity is not at all welcomed, and if there is anyone who chooses to become a Christian, he might have to leave the country or might have to die also. So I came to know a little bit here and there about Jesus when I was in Bhutan, although I was born and brought up in a very strict Hindu family. When I was exiled in 1992, we came down to India hoping that we might get shelter in India.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, where did you find yourself, then? When you were pushed out of Bhutan, you were pushed into a camp in India?

DHAN KHATIWODA

No; we just were thrown out of the country – we were forcefully evicted from the country.

DAVE BAST

And at that time you weren't a Christian yourself; you had been raised a Hindu. You were only a teenager...

DHAN KHATIWODA

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And the reason you were expelled was because you were of a different ethnic group and a different language from the majority people.

DHAN KHATIWODA

Right; right.

DAVE BAST

So, India for a time, and then what?

DHAN KHATIWODA

We all came down to India and we did not get any shelter in India because there was some kind of a treaty between India and Bhutan and they did not want to go against it; so we were further sent out from India; so finally we became refugees in the third country – that is, in Nepal.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, when you were in Nepal you were in this refugee camp, how many years did you spend in the camp?

DHAN KHATIWODA

I spent seventeen years in the refugee camp...

BOB HEERSPINK

Seventeen years!

DAVE BAST

Wow.

DHAN KHATIWODA

Yes.

DAVE BAST

What was it like? Where did you live? Did you have houses to live in or tents or what?

DHAN KHATIWODA

When I first came to the refugee camp, we did not have any house, or tent, or anything like that. We came, we started settling in the riverbank and we had some poles and plastic and we made a roof out of the plastic, and there were no walls in the hut in the beginning.

DAVE BAST

So, it wasn't a prepared place for you?

DHAN KHATIWODA

No, it wasn't.

DAVE BAST

Just in an area where you had to fend for yourself.

DHAN KHATIWODA

Right; and slowly, as far as I remember, I studied in the camp as a student, and when I studied, I studied under the shade of a tree; that was my classroom in the camp.

BOB HEERSPINK

There were no schools there like we would know them here in the States?

DHAN KHATIWODA

Oh, no; here the schools are so wonderful – so overwhelming – so great buildings with AC/fan/electricity, and in the camp there was no electricity, no fan, dirt floor, and when there was rainfall, you know, everything used to come into our house, and when there was sunshine everything used to be...

DAVE BAST

You were open to the elements.

DHAN KHATIWODA

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, what are the emotions that you have living in that kind of a camp? I mean, certainly at first maybe you are hopeful that this isn't going to be a long experience; and then years go on – 17 years. What are the emotional feelings that you have? Is there kind of a rollercoaster of hope and then despair?

DHAN KHATIWODA

Yes; actually, in the beginning, we all thought that it might not go for so long – it would not go for so long; but we started living there and it continues year after year and year after year: Eight years, nine years, ten years, and there is no solution to our problem, and we are living in such a difficult situation. It is not a house; I would not call it a house. Later on, agencies came in and they bettered our living, but then, too, our houses were just bamboo huts with plastic roofs or sandwich panel, and the walls were made out of bamboo sticks and the floor was dirt floor.

DAVE BAST

How were you able to eat? Were you able to earn money at all?

Dhan Khatiwoda:

No; we were... actually UNHCR – United Nations High Commission for Refugees – gave us some amount of rice, vegetable, and basic things that a person might need.

DAVE BAST

Just enough to keep you alive.

DHAN KHATIWODA

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

And then there was a point at which you had opportunity to come to the United States, I take it. Is this where you went... you went from the camp to the U.S.?

DHAN KHATIWODA

Yes, from the refugee camp to the United States; but before that, there were so many difficult situations that we had to go through; and at points we just lost our hope and thought: Nothing is going to happen. I was actually given a scholarship by UNHCR to go to India and study.

DAVE BAST

The United Nations enabled you to study in India?

DHAN KHATIWODA

Yes; they gave me a scholarship, they gave me money to go and study in India; and that is where I came to know more about Jesus Christ; and I studied in a mission school...

DAVE BAST

Ah... okay.

DHAN KHATIWODA

And then that is the place where I came to know about Jesus, and from the time I came to know about Jesus I started learning more and more. I studied Bible and I have many experiences where I prayed and I was helped by God in many different situations. To me personally, when I came to know about Jesus, I accepted him after... It did not take a long time for me to accept him because there was truth in it and I got to experience God in my heart, and I got so many prayer returns. My prayers were all answered; because we only come to know God... if we have to go through difficult situations, that is the time we pray and ask for help from God, and I have so many experiences where God has helped me. He has rained me with blessings, even when I was not officially a Christian. I just accepted him, but I could not proclaim it because, I told you before, if I had to proclaim that I was a Christian then it would have been very difficult for me to live in that society, but I had accepted Jesus in my heart.

DAVE BAST

But you couldn't be open about it yet until you came here, yes.

DHAN KHATIWODA

Yes.

DAVE BAST

It is interesting, you raise a very important point, I think. When people are disrupted like that – their lives are turned upside down and they are driven away – they are often open to hear the Gospel or to cry out to God, to pray in a way that they wouldn't have been in their old life.

DHAN KHATIWODA

Right.

DAVE BAST

And today, you are working with refugees here in the United States.

DHAN KHATIWODA

Yes; that also is a blessing from God.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, what you have gone through – what you have experienced – you can relate to their struggles. Your experience now has prepared you for the help that you are giving to others.

DHAN KHATIWODA

Right, right; definitely.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well Dhan, we want to thank you for being with us. You have really shared what it is like to be in the camps, the emotional challenges; you have given us a window into what Jesus experienced with his family – what that was like in Egypt, far from home. You have challenged us to think about refugees a new way. Thanks for being with us.

DHAN KHATIWODA

My pleasure. Thank you very much.

DAVE BAST

Yes; thanks, Dhan. That was great. We are going to wrap up the program in just a moment, but first let's take a short break.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. So, we have spent a little bit of time, Bob, sort of vicariously trying to understand what it is like to live as a refugee; and obviously that is a big part of this story that Matthew tells in Matthew Chapter 2, about Jesus and the Holy Family; but what is the point really, as you see it?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, Jesus going down to Egypt sets up a situation where Matthew can say that it is out of Egypt that God has called his son; now that was Israel in the Old Testament, but now it is Jesus, and all the hopes, all the expectations that were laid on Israel are now being fulfilled in Jesus. That is really what this story is centered in.

DAVE BAST

Well, and I also think it is part of that whole theme running through this story of the voluntary poverty that Jesus embraced for us. You know, he wasn't born in the palace. The Magi go to Herod, which is the logical move to make, and ask for him in Jerusalem, and instead they are sent down to this humble home in Bethlehem.

BOB HEERSPINK

And even after he is called back out of Egypt, Joseph wants to go to Bethlehem, because after all, he thinks that is where the Messiah should be raised; and instead he ends up in Nazareth. It is Hicksville, so you know, it is coming as a refugee and ending up in poverty – ending up in this little backwater town – because that is what Jesus is taking to himself; he is taking upon himself our suffering, the poverty of life, to fulfill his role as the Messiah King.

DAVE BAST

Somebody once said that the darkest room you may have to enter has already been visited by Jesus ahead of you. In other words, whoever you are, whatever your lot in life, you could be living like Dhan with a bamboo stick hut and a plastic roof and a dirt floor, and Jesus has lived that way. He knows that. He identifies with that. From the lowest of the low to the highest of the high, he is one of us; and I find that so deeply moving, especially as I think about this real problem in the world: What about us? Do we care – 40-some million people living like this? What might we do to help?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, there are hundreds of thousands of refugees, for example, that have come out of Iraq; many of them Christians; going through these kinds of experiences; but what really struck me when Dhan was talking was how he said: I came into a relationship with Jesus Christ, and that changed things for me. It really sustained me through this whole experience as a refugee. It really put my life onto a track that it wasn't on before.

DAVE BAST

Well, ask yourself a simple question: If you had seen the Holy Family walking down the road on their way to Egypt, would you have taken them in? Would you have offered them food or drink? Would you have done what you could for them? Of course, you would; so would I; but the point is, maybe we can still do that by reaching out in some way that we are able to someone in similar circumstances today, because Jesus said after all, didn't he: If you do it for one of the least of these, you are doing it for me.

BOB HEERSPINK

Dhan just told us that there are going to be 60,000 refugees coming from the camp he was in to North America. What an opportunity to share the love and compassion of Christ.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks again for joining our *Groundwork* conversation today; and don't forget that it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keeps our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing, and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us online at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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