

THEN YOU SHALL SEE

Rev. Kate Jones Calone
Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-15a

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. ²For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. ³Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. ⁵Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. ⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

Matthew 2:1-15a

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. ¹³Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, 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." ¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod.

In our ritual retelling of the Christmas story, we might not remember that before they ever got to Bethlehem, the wise men had a meeting with Herod.¹ I have a problem, Herod explained to them, and I need your help. I need to find this child whom you also seek, but I don't know exactly where he is. I suspect he's somewhere in Bethlehem, so I need you to ask around, use your sources, follow your star—then report back to me. And don't worry, I'll treat him well when you find him.

Instead, after visiting Jesus in that Bethlehem stable, the wise men went home by another road, deciding to avoid Herod and his directive. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fled to Egypt, a migrant family fleeing the violence in their own country. And in one of the most terrible accounts in scripture, Herod took out his anger on the infant children of Bethlehem.

Early last month, around the time I began to bring the boxes of Christmas decorations down from the attic and unpack my collection of nativity sets, conversations were taking place here on Long Island (and across

¹ Portions of this sermon are taken from materials I previously published in "When the Wise Men Refused to Collaborate with Empire," <https://sojo.net/articles/when-wise-men-refused-collaborate-empire>, January 6, 2017.

the country) about whether local law enforcement agencies should assist Immigration and Customs Enforcement (or ICE, in shorthand) in tracking down and turning over undocumented individuals living in the United States. As political discourse and top-down pressure threatens to move us even further than we already have been down the road of mass deportations, those seeking to find and arrest people without documents hope that local law enforcement officers will become *de facto* agents of ICE. National coverage ensued when, despite strong opposition from local human rights and justice organizations, our sheriff here in Suffolk County reversed an established policy and announced that his office “no longer will ask for a judge’s order before” holding in custody immigrants “wanted by federal agents for deportation.”²

There are important policy and practical considerations at stake in these conversations. One of the most important tools in pursuing public safety is establishing relationships and trust with and within communities. When that trust breaks down—because community members feel their immigration status is too insecure to interact with the police—then public safety breaks down as well. Crimes aren’t reported, witnesses don’t come forward, and victims fear immigration consequences more than they fear their offenders.

Moreover, back-door attempts to enlist state and local officers to perform federal functions undermines the care and intention required to maintain the integrity of our democracy. And, as meaningful and comprehensive immigration reform languishes at the federal level, many localities have balked at enabling a broken federal system, especially when it too often relies on racial-ethnic profiling and lacks due process protections. So across the country, many local law enforcement agencies have decided that they will not target members of their communities solely to determine immigration status or detain people solely on the basis of immigration status.

And there, among the nativity sets on my mantle, depicted in many different shapes and colors and materials, were the wise men, who had decided not to collaborate in facilitating Herod’s raid on the holy family. Although we often focus on the beautiful parts of the Christmas story—the peaceful, silent night, the angels and shepherds and animals—the time after the birth of Jesus was a time of great fear and uncertainty for his family. The threat of Herod in their own country required the family to flee to Egypt for safety—fleeing violence in their homeland...refugees, seeking welcome and protection and shelter in a strange land.

Just as the family had been protected and sheltered at Jesus’ birth, so now did the wise men’s refusal to participate in Herod’s directive shelter the family from harm. No doubt God would have found another way to protect Jesus, to ensure that Jesus grew up to accomplish his saving work in the world. But it is significant to acknowledge, especially in our particular moment in time, that God chose to move God’s salvation story forward through these holy non-collaborators. Somehow the wise men realized, whether by recognizing Herod’s duplicitousness or taking seriously the warning that came to them in a dream, that it would be unjust and unwise to serve as Herod’s enforcers. Their resistance was the first evidence that this child’s birth would turn everything upside down—Mary’s magnificat, remember? “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty,” she sang.

A journey had taken the wise men far from home, across long distances and borders and into a foreign land seeking—what? It must not have been clear to them at the beginning, or even, I would guess, after the standing in front of the humble child who somehow, inexplicably, was himself a king. I can only imagine their conversation on the trip back, before they separated, each to his own home, about what they had seen! Starlight, illuminating the face of a child who made God known to them. Epiphany. Light in the darkness.

And somehow, too, light exposing the darkness, revealing to the wise men what they might not have seen in Herod during that first meeting. Yet, having looked into the face of another—a child of God, the *very child* of God—*now* they could see.

We are called now to *see*—to see the face of God in our fellow humans, in our neighbors, in the members of our community whose present is filled with fear. To see the Christ-child in the immigrant family who has had to flee their own land and come here seeking refuge and a better life. Seeking light in the darkness.

At a recent event, Sr. Rosalie Carven of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Brentwood read the poem “Refugee Blues,” published in 1940 by the British poet W.H. Auden. It captured the experience of the refugees of his time. Listen to their story in verse:

² Victor Manuel Ramos, “Suffolk sheriff reverses policy on holding immigrant inmates,” *Newsday* (December 25, 2016).

Say this city has ten million souls, Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes. Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us. Once we had a country and we thought it fair, Look in the atlas and you'll find it there. We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now.

In the village churchyard there grows an old yew, Every spring it blossoms anew. Old passports can't do that, my dear, old passports can't do that.

The consul banged the table and said, "If you've got no passport you're officially dead". But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive.

Went to a committee; they offered me a chair, Asked me politely to return next year. But where shall we go to-day, my dear, but where shall we go to-day?

Came to a public meeting; the speaker got up and said, "If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread". He was talking of you and me, my dear, he was talking of you and me.

Thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky, It was Hitler over Europe, saying, "They must die". O we were in his mind, my dear, O we were in his mind.

Saw a poodle in a jacket fastened with a pin, Saw a door opened and a cat let in. But they weren't German Jews, my dear, but they weren't German Jews.

Went down the harbour and stood upon the quay, Saw the fish swimming as if they were free. Only ten feet away, my dear, only ten feet away.

Walked through a wood, saw the birds in the trees, They had no politicians and sang at their ease. They weren't the human race, my dear, they weren't the human race.

Dreamed I saw a building with a thousand floors, A thousand windows and a thousand doors. Not one of them was ours, my dear, not one of them was ours.

Stood on a great plain in the falling snow, Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro. Looking for you and me, my dear, looking for you and me.

Just after Christmas, the *New York Times* told the story of Javier Flores Garcia, an arborist living undocumented in the United States who was scheduled to be deported.³ His only crime has been re-entering the United States after removal. Javier now lives in sanctuary in the basement of a Philadelphia church, where his family, including three children all born in the United States, can come to visit him. For them all to return to Mexico, they say, means no future. To be separated would be devastating.

And so, as Howard Thurman writes, "the work of Christmas begins." And so...what? What is the work that *we* are called to do? What does the church, confronted with policies and directives from the halls of power, have to say and do, now that *we* have visited the Christ-child, have heard *his* story again this year? Where have we seen his story, his face, his family again in other times and places? Where do we encounter him, *see* him, face to face even now?

Christ, be our light, shine through the darkness. Shine in your church today. Then we shall see.
Epiphany. Amen.

³ Laurie Goodstein, "Houses of Worship Posed to Serve as Trump-Era Immigrant Sanctuaries," *New York Times* (Dec. 27, 2016), www.nytimes.com.