

"HELLO IN EXILE"



"The risen Christ is still in exile in His world, a stranger and a foreigner, unknown, a refugee, waiting to be blessed and to bless by the encounter of hello..."

"Adapted from "Hello in Exile" by John and Mary Harrell, Berkeley, CA

Scripture:

Psalm 121

A Song of Ascents.

1. I lift up my eyes to the hills — from where will my help come?
2. My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.
3. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
4. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
5. The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
6. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.
7. The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.
8. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and for evermore.

Matthew 2:13-15

The Escape to Egypt

13. Now 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.'
14. Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt,
15. and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'



HELLO IN EXILE

Thirty years ago, refugees from the Vietnam War began entering the United States to start a new life. Many of them were fleeing for their lives because of their efforts to assist American military forces during the war. As the flow of refugees began, Church World Service brought together several denominations (including Presbyterians) to find staff that could assist these refugees in the transition to life in the United States.

Since I had lived in Thailand and spoke the Thai language, I was invited to develop this ministry in the Central Valley from Bakersfield to Redding and parts of Nevada. Looking back now, I can see that during the years Alice and I served

churches and Councils of Churches in Thailand, Oregon, Michigan and California, God was preparing me to take on this task and to develop the Presbyterian Refugee Resettlement Program based in Fresno (now in its 25th year).

With an assistant and a translator, we were able to resettle about one hundred refugees a year, most from Southeast Asia and later from Assyria, Armenia and Iran. Local Presbyterian churches overcame their fear of strangers and welcomed these newcomers – exiles from their homelands – into their congregations and communities.

I was also sent by our denomination to meet with refugees in primitive refugee camps in Southeast Asia and later in Europe and Turkey.

They were uprooted survivors who had escaped to freedom in boats or on foot carrying all that remained of their possessions on their backs. I saw firsthand the intense anxiety on their faces as well as their courage as they hoped for resettlement someplace far away – some safe place where they could end their exile with friendly sponsors.

According to a statement published by Church World Service, “Fleeing civil war or ethnic conflict is only the first step in a perilous journey. Between temporary haven in a refugee camp and the chance to begin a new life, there are many dangers and obstacles to overcome. Even in a camp, refugees ... are often targets of government or rebel attacks.

Very few refugees are offered a fresh start in another country. Most refugees spend years, sometimes their whole lives in refugee camps.”

Andrew Mayak, a refugee from Sudan wrote these words from the Kakuma refugee camp:

“As refugees, we are victims of violence and war. We left our motherland because we were being mistreated in many ways. We ran to get protection in other countries. But as a refugee . . .

You are subject to prejudice and mistaken always.

You can pass through any disaster and nobody will care about you.

Oh! What is lovely like our homeland?

In your own country you are free, free like a butterfly when it flies from flower to flower, free like a fish moving in the water.

Homeland (Andrew concludes) is a second heaven. . . .”

During the years I worked among refugees, I read a remarkable poem by John and Mary Harrell of Berkeley. Its title was “*Hello in Exile.*” I remember thinking as I read the poem for the first time how much this Christmas poem which focuses on Jesus was similar to the experience of the refugees with whom I was working. And the image of Jesus himself as a refugee was made real to me in a new way.

As you remember, after Jesus was born, King Herod was determined to find this so-called “King of the Jews.” The whole idea of a Jewish king angered him so much that he ordered the death of all male children under the age of two. Joseph and Mary knew they had to escape quickly. They became refugees, frightened, fleeing their

homeland to some safety among strangers in Egypt, a twenty mile walk from Bethlehem.

Poet and theologian Frederick Buechner says we are all basically strangers:

“Here I am, and there you are. Here I am, the stranger in your midst. There you are, who are the midst. ... How can we be other than strangers when each of us lives inside the walls of his or her own life . . . ?

“And yet, in another sense, we are none of us strangers. . . How can we be strangers, when we laugh and cry at the same things . . . and occasionally astonish ourselves and everybody else by performing the same uncharacteristic deeds of ... kindness and love?

“We’re strangers and we’re not strangers. Me here, you there ... Can God, in His grace and power, speak anything that matters ultimately through the likes of me ... to the likes of you?”

And now I would like to share with you, with Alice’s help, some excerpts from John and Mary Harrell’s Christmas poem “*Hello in Exile.*”

TED: A world whirled and staggered in a night of catastrophic happenings when God spoke and the Eternal became contemporaneous with temporal humanity.

ALICE: Except mostly no one was aware of anything in particular,
The scribes at least should have known about this night and the birth in this night;
or, had they read their books with only dutiful expectation,
and said their prayers and gone upstairs to sleep at last and find the future like the past?

TED: Elijah had not come. Nothing had been out of the ordinary as long as anyone could remember in his lifetime or his father’s lifetime or his grandfather’s lifetime.

ALICE: The scribes kept records like that. Scribes would not make good shepherds. Sheep have a way of getting out of line and getting lost sometimes, and shepherds have to understand that.

TED: It is that kind of understanding of how things are that makes a shepherd capable of being a shepherd

**and prevents a scribe from ever becoming anything else
or being a shepherd
or hearing and seeing
what the shepherds heard and saw that night.**

ALICE: For there, as the shepherds lay on dewed grass and kept an eye on their sheep, they heard the blessing of rightness like a song from over the brow in the silence and stillness of the night.

**TED: The sheep stood
the air stood
the world stood
in the moment of rightness.**

ALICE: The shepherds, who more than once, to a man, had risked their lives for their sheep and knew what duty was:

They wouldn't talk about it.
They simply knew what to do.

**TED: That is how the shepherds left their flocks untended
and left themselves and everything in the Providence of God.
That is how the shepherds found the stable,
that is how the shepherds once again heard the sign
and saw the sign of rightness.**

ALICE: The new babe
and the new mother
and the renewed father.

TED:

**All these were all the signs, surely, of God's rightness for all [humanity].
They looked down at the boy-child,
recognizing in this potential of manhood their common manhood and the wonder that the boy-man was man-man like themselves,
and in their wonder they came to the realization that here was the God-man and they trembled.**

ALICE: The shepherds trembled in the only real moment of rightness the world has ever known.
It was the only moment of rightness for Mary or Joseph or anyone.
Hard though it was to realize.

**TED: It was the only moment of peace on earth
and every one who has lived ever since
and has been confronted by the news of His coming
has had to contend with it for the rest of a lifetime.**

**This one moment was the only moment of peace
and it was over at the moment of recognition.**

ALICE: With all the scribe mind knowledge of this and that,
all classified and codified,
a child had been born without the scribes knowing about it.

**TED: Gentiles had come.
Shepherds had carried rumors.
The government was on edge.**

ALICE: The scribes were at the edge of a mystery, and were driven to hear the Word of God. Precisely in their heritage the scribes found their salvation.

For generations, it had been known that the Savior would come just as he had come.

**TED: When they reflected on their experience,
it was as clear as day.
In Bethlehem, at this moment,
the Messiah had come,
and already He was redeeming the time.**

ALICE: They knew about it.
There it was in their heritage.
It was part of their experience and longing.

**TED: The world is exile.
Going out into the world is going into exile,
as the Holy Family
went into exile when it went out into the world.**

ALICE: Exile is leaving and separating and hoping to meet and encounter.

**TED: The world is exile,
and everyone in the world is in exile
and everyone hopes that it might be otherwise.**

ALICE: When you have left and said goodbye you wander through the world waiting to say hello and for someone else in the world to say hello and to mean it when they say hello.

**TED: In that exile of the Holy Family
the child learned what it meant
to be taken up at last into the arms of a man who said hello
and he never forgot it.**

ALICE: When he was a man and journeying to Jerusalem for a man's death, he remembered, and he took those children up into his lap and into his arms and held them as only the King of Love could have held them, and he said hello.

He said the hello of God, which
when we have translated it
and formulated it
we say, "He blessed them."

TED:

**He simply took the children up into his arms
and said hello from the inside of his heart.
That, of course, is a very big thing to do,
to open yourself that much and not make a sham
opening, like you were really being open
hearted.**

ALICE: Or, on the other hand, being nicely polite and
keeping at a distance, thank you just the same.
It is a very big thing to say "Hello" and mean it.

TED: Well, he knew that.

**He knew it because during that exile,
when the Holy Family went out into the world,
and they longed for that kind of blessing
and needed it
and yearned for it –**

ALICE: Just perhaps
at some turn in the road
at some turn of events
they found it. (They were in exile for a very long time.)

**TED: And just perhaps the Holy Child found it for
himself**

**when he was old enough,
when he knew what it meant.**

Perhaps the Holy Child received the blessing of
hello

when he was in his own earliest exile in the world,
when some one of us in the exile world said hello to
him

who was there and was making the world, when the
world was made

and has been sustaining it ever since

- the everlasting, eternal Son.

ALICE: The risen Christ is still in exile in His world,
a stranger and a foreigner,
unknown, a refugee

**TED: Waiting to be blessed
and to bless**

by the encounter of hello.

**Waiting for the end of the exile
waiting for the Kingdom without end
which He brings!**

Amen.

Selected texts from "*Hello in Exile*"
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