

When Home is the Mouth of a Shark

Rev. John Allen

Warsan Shire was born in Kenya 12 days after I was born in Boston.

Her parents were refugees from Somolia.

When Shire was one, her family migrated from Kenya to the United Kingdom.

She is now a world renowned poet.

Here are a few excerpts from her poem Home, for which she drew on the experiences of her parents who first fled from Somalia as a young couple, and then with her, their one year old daughter in tow, sought to make a life for themselves in the UK.

She writes:

no one leaves home unless

home is the mouth of a shark.

you only run for the border when you see the whole city running as well.

your neighbors running faster

than you, you only leave home

when home won't let you stay.

no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land.

who would choose to spend days and nights in the stomach of a truck unless

the miles travelled meant something more than journey.

i want to go home, but home is the mouth of a shark home is the barrel of the

gun

and no one would leave home

unless home chased you to the shore unless home tells you to

leave what you could not behind, even if it was human.

no one leaves home until home

is a damp voice in your ear saying leave, run now, i don't know what i've become.

There is this part of the Christmas Story that we often forget.

Where the home that Mary and Joseph are making with their infant child becomes the mouth of a shark. Where they set out across the desert into Egypt because that journey is somehow safer than the four walls of their Nazarene home.

We often forget that part of the Christmas Story is about the horrifying reaction of a despot who dispatches death-squads into the countryside to squelch whatever this new thing God is doing might be.

Herod's fear for his own tenuous grasp on power is so complete, that even an infant feels like a threat.

And so Mary and Joseph's home won't let them stay. They run for the border. They don't have a choice.

The miracle of Christmas is captured in the word 'Emmanuel' which means God with us. It give voice to the mystery of God coming to live with us, as one of us.

It is a frankly scandalous notion that the God of heaven and earth decided to walk in this world, and not as some sort of superhero overpowering evil and setting everything right, but as a person who suffered the worst pain and suffering the world had to offer, who lived among the poor and was executed by the Roman Empire.

What this means for us is that God has first-hand experience of human life. That our God does not float above history, but is a part of it. Our God is not distant, but close.

And one of the very first experiences that God had on Earth was the experience of being a refugee. Of being pulled by fear-filled parents away from violence, across a border, into a foreign land.

And of course you know, the experience of being a refugee is sadly not confined to history. Our world today is filled with displaced people and groups. Fleeing war, fleeing violence and gangs, fleeing climate disasters, drought, fire, and flood.

And of course you, that the question of how our country treats such people is a live issue in our politics and our social conscience.

What I find missing is a serious reckoning with what people have fled.

Try to imagine what would have to be happening here, for you to pack a bag, lock the door to your home behind you, filled with everything you can't carry, and get in the car and drive North.

What kind of thing would you need to fear to risk that much?

What kind would have to happen to the world you know, before a world you don't feels more inviting.

Its probably hard for most of us to imagine answers to such questions.

But God does not need to imagine. God sees it everyday. God has lived it.

One of the most profound things Jesus taught us was that if we are looking to serve God, we can do so by serving the most vulnerable in the world.

Whatever you do to the last and the least, he said, you do to me.

There are about as many opinions about immigrants and refugees in this country as there are people. Your heads are probably full of enough talking points, policy positions, and hot takes to last you a lifetime.

I don't really want to add to all that noise.

But I think our faith has a very important piece of ballast to offer to all the tumult. And that is an insistence on humanity.

It is the demand that every time you hear someone talking about immigration or asylum as an issue, you remember that it is about real people, each with their own stories.

That whenever anyone paints with a broad brush, you remember that every one of those people made the unimaginable choice to leave the

world they know to one where they don't. Who left almost everything behind and ran.

Whose worlds were so profoundly shattered that rubber rafts became safer than dry land, and deserts more hospitable than home.

There is a beautiful painting at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston depicting the Holy Family's flight into Egypt. Mary is sleeping, holding the infant Jesus as they sit on the paw of the Sphinx. Joseph sleeps on the ground beside a dying fire.

The whole painting is a dim blue grey, as if the sun is just about to rise. A single star hangs in sky.

For a long time that was my abiding image of this story.

But I realized something recently. In seeking to kill Jesus, Herod ordered the death of every male child in the land. Mary and Joseph surely did not flee alone. They must have been part of a crowd, running for the lives of their beloved.

The picture should be packed with people.

Which is a reminder to me when I see a image of a crowd of refugees pressed against a border, or piled into a raft. That if we really believe what Jesus said about the least of these, then if we open our hearts and look with the eyes of our faith.

We would see the very presence of God among them.