

Celebrating St. Joseph

By Ken Kozy

Introduction:

Saint Joseph Day is celebrated annually around the world by almost all of the 1.2 billion Catholics and many millions of other Christian denominations. On the day named for him, there is usually a collection for the poor and a St. Joseph Table festivity where many neighbors prepare and donate foods for everyone to enjoy. He has been named one of the patron saints in many countries such as Canada, Mexico, Poland, etc. and in islands such as Sicily in Italy.

In the Bible, there are two really famous people named Joseph. The Old Testament tells us about Jacob's son, Joseph, who saved his 11 brothers from a great famine even though the brothers previously had sold him into slavery so that he wound up in Egypt. The New Testament tells us about another Joseph who became the foster-father of Jesus and the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Both were brave men and both believed in the power of dreams and their God.

What happened to Joseph and Mary soon after the birth of Jesus is an exciting story worth reading and applying to our life's challenges today. Here is a story centered on Joseph and closely based upon the Gospel's descriptions.

You may not have looked at Joseph, Mary and Jesus as refugees before; but clearly that is what they became and survived. We are privileged to view their courage and God's guidance in their lives.



The Nativity: Joseph, Jesus, Mary
(Photos by Ken Kozy)

The Story: Why Joseph and his family were forced to flee their country.

In the middle of the night they received a warning to leave their home in Bethlehem at once. Joseph and Mary were frightened and immediately hugged their sleeping child. They quickly began packing for their escape.

As it turned out they left town just in the nick of time.

There was enough light from the starry evening sky to help them find their way out of town. Joseph decided to use the back roads and paths thru the countryside instead of the main roads. He figured the government's troops soon would search the major trade routes looking for them.

The fact that they had done no wrong and broke no laws did not mean anything when a government tyrant and his henchmen decided to kill their baby. Even though they were born in this country and were citizens, they had no rights now and could expect no justice from this powerful government – which its dictator totally controlled by using fear and military force.

So, they left their home as fast as they could. Mary was scared and held her dozing baby boy closely as she swiftly walked next to her husband. Soon, she gained courage from watching her child's peacefulness because she suddenly realized this child was so special and admired by God that he would not be harmed.

Their donkey hauled the meager food and clothes they had hastily loaded on its back. Wrapped and hidden within those clothes were three valuable gifts which included some gold coins. Earlier that evening, three generous visitors, Magi, from distant foreign lands had surprised them with their kingly presents. Hopefully, these precious gifts now would help them survive the long dangerous road and days of travel ahead of them. They had to leave

behind their home, furnishings, dishes and wood-working tools.

After about an hour of travelling over rocky paths they stopped to drink some water from a jug loaded on the donkey's back. As they paused and looked back towards their town which was located on top of a hill, they were horrified. Several large fires were burning against the darkened sky. They had hoped that their departure would spare townspeople from such terror and suffering. Sadly, the government's soldiers were aggressively inflicting punishment on the town anyway.



The Massacre of the Innocents by Nicolas Poussin, 1625
(Public Domain: Painting)

They were refugees now. Like most refugees, they had narrowly escaped death. Had Mary and Joseph stayed in Bethlehem, their baby would have been murdered by the Roman-appointed king, King Herod, who called himself “The Great.” In his anger and rage, he had ordered his troops to kill all boys two-years-old or younger on that night. He wanted to eliminate any political annoyance of a “Messiah” or religious “Savior” being born there who might challenge his authority. Herod found out about this birth from the well-meaning Magi travelers who innocently told him they were bringing their gifts for the “new-born King of the Jews.”

Today's Biblical scholars estimate that his soldiers murdered more than 20 male children and anybody who tried to stop them in the Bethlehem area. The children were innocent victims who died without knowing why. The surviving children and adults would later suffer years of traumatic memories of that massacre. The concealed daggers and weapons of the townspeople were no match for Roman-made swords and spears.

This little family trembled with fear again – fear for themselves and for their former neighbors. But what could they do now? They figured that the soldiers would pursue them as well as their gift-bearing visitors. The Magi with their camels escaped using the eastern desert route. When the morning light will appear, the military's cavalry will come galloping across the valley to capture any fleeing refugees. So, they had to continue onward to find a cave in which to hide before the breaking of the dawn.

Together, they bowed their heads in prayer and begged God to help their neighbors and for protection and courage.

When finished, Joseph bravely turned and immediately led them southward as he had been told to do in his dream. Because of the rocky ground, hopefully their tracks and path of escape would not be found by the government's scouts and spies in the morning's daylight.

They walked as quietly as they could, passing small herds of sheep in the fields. Amazingly neither the sheep nor their donkey made any vocal sounds – it was a quiet passage. Meanwhile, shepherds and their normally vigilant sheep dogs continued their sleep in the silent, peaceful hours after midnight. No one saw them, so no one would be forced by the soldiers of King Herod the Great as witnesses to tell about their passage.

After they successfully passed through the valley of grazing grass, both took a deep breath of relief and continued towards Egypt. Just before dawn, they found a cave in a hill where

they could hide should the Roman soldiers come searching for them.

This stopover in a secluded cave also allowed them much needed sleep – they were exhausted from the arduous over-night escape.



Flight to Egypt *



Visit of the Magi *

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When they awoke later, a new concern came to mind which they nervously whispered to each other. If this journey of exodus succeeded, would the country at the border, Egypt, allow them entry? After all, they were refugees. They could speak very little of the language of that country, and their religious beliefs were entirely different from those of the majority.

They could learn the new language, but knew they would never consider changing their religion. It was handed down to them by generations of ancestors who had suffered greatly because of their belief in their One God and in the prayers and practices of their Jewish Faith.

They looked at each other and instantly knew each other's thoughts. They fell to their knees again and begged God for help, courage and guidance.

Now, their child started to awake. Mary gently rocked the young Jesus, hoping to keep him quiet. Meanwhile, Joseph gave some water to the donkey from their water jug.

During the next days, they bought food and water from local farmers and villagers, but ate and stayed overnight in the fields. They avoided questions about their journey or origin.

They wandered more than 250 miles over the following weeks before they finally came to the border between Palestine's Idumean province and Egypt. The border guards there usually required an entry "tax" from refugees.

Luckily, news spread slowly in that era, and there was no military order to detain a family fleeing from Bethlehem. Anyway, the tax collectors and soldiers were focused on extracting lucrative customs money from the rich traders and merchants passing through with their caravans of goods. The tax collected from this family probably was kept by the border guards to supplement their poor pay.

Before arriving at the border outpost, Joseph secretly took out a few gold coins from one of the gift boxes they had received in Bethlehem from their generous visitors. Then, he approached the border guards and negotiated a while; otherwise, the guards and tax collectors might become suspicious of how much gold they had with them and try to rob them. Finally, these humble travelers received permission to pass onward to the Egyptian border town.

As soon as they bought some food and water there, they wanted to leave town so they could eat as they journeyed on the road again. They were apprehensive and did not want to draw attention from the Egyptians in town; some had contempt for refugees who might take their jobs – but did like when they spent their money there. Yet, many other friendly Egyptians welcomed and received refugees openly.

At the edge of town they met another Jewish family who invited them to their home to celebrate the Sabbath at sundown. The food purchased was expensive but smelled fresh and tasted good. Mary prepared their meal with care and in their prescribed tradition. It was their first in-home Sabbath meal since they began their flight to Egypt. It energized them for the remainder of their trip. This was a day of true rest, joy and celebration as they prayed, sang and joyfully thanked God.

Not knowing anyone else in Egypt, they wandered from town to town. Finally, they found a small city with a Jewish enclave where they could be at ease among their own people, speak their own language and observe their weekly Sabbath and prayers together. They were ecstatic and amazed when at last they experienced such religious freedom.

Joseph was a carpenter and builder; he knew there was always a need for a good craftsman. People in this city needed his skills, so he opened a small carpenter's shop. In a short time, his family was viewed by its citizens as productive "outsiders" in this new land.

Just as he had done in Bethlehem, and before that in Nazareth, Joseph worked hard. His carpenter's shop became a successful small business serving the needs of the Egyptian townspeople and the area farmers. His business grew and finally he could hire and train local people to help with the work.

Mary took good care of their home and little boy under difficult circumstances. But like all refugees forced to leave their homes, she had to focus on survival.

Still, fear was a daily companion to these refugees, same as for all immigrants to a new land. If any one of them broke a law or seemed to cause trouble for the authorities, they could be summarily deported back to the country they fled – to an uncertain fate. They could be accused falsely out of anger or envy – just so an accuser could get rid of them and confiscate their abandoned homes and possessions. There was no appeal. Such was the reality of their lives.

However, political and religious refugees who had to flee to Egypt were grateful that the country even accepted them. The immigrants added to the economy because most worked hard and long hours at little pay that just covered their housing, food, and supplies. They enjoyed the limited freedoms they had now in Egypt.

They considered this in awe, since over 1,500 years before, God helped their ancestors through Moses to exodus from their slavery and submission to the early Egyptian Pharaohs.

Similar to the history of Israel, Egypt eventually had been conquered by the Greeks and Romans.

Joseph loved Mary and Jesus. Indeed, he risked his life and reputation many times to protect them. And they loved him dearly. He overcame his fears with great courage during their terrifying escape.

They were successful, but now wondered what would be their next step. They bravely faced an uncertain future.

Joseph trusted God that someday, they would return to Israel. He missed travelling to the Temple in Jerusalem for their annual religious observances. As a foster-father, he looked forward to taking Jesus there and teaching him their prayers and beliefs.

The Bible tells us that the child Jesus grew in wisdom and strength and that they returned to Israel. Jesus became our teacher and Savior.

St. Joseph did well. Let us celebrate him now!



St. Joseph Day Table at Church



Statue: Jesus & Joseph

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