

## NOT THE USUAL CHRISTMAS STORY

### A Worship Drama by Martha Nell Thomson

Like refugees today, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus had to flee their home to find safety in another country

The worship is conducted within the framework of a series of story segments. Groupings of two to three people tell each segment. The people for each segment will need to be at the front for the segment and then be seated at the end of their segment. Although the presentation has 11 voices, some of the voices could be read by the same individual in different segments.

This is a drama! Although the parts are to be read, do so slowly, giving thought and emphasis to what is being read.

Although a sermon may be included within the service, the service can also stand alone without a formal sermon.

### CALL TO WORSHIP (voices 1, 2, 3)

**Voice 1:** It is that time of year again—Advent, when we wait expectantly for the birth of Jesus. The signs are all around us: the music, the decorations, the shopping, the baking...ah, what a joyous time of year!

**Voice 2:** But the story of the birth of Jesus isn't all peace and joy, you know. There is a lot of the story we gloss over, or outright omit.

**Voice 1:** But why ruin the season?

**Voice 2:** If we don't look honestly and completely at the story from the time of Jesus, then we don't get the message and meaning of the story of Jesus for our time. It is like having a beautiful present, but keeping it all wrapped up.

**Voice 3:** "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" And he said to them, "Pay attention to what you hear" (Mark 4:23–24).

**All:** Let us open our ears and our hearts and our minds to the depth of meanings in the story and in so doing, worship God.

### INTROIT (choir groups A and B)

Choir group A, dressed as Romans in togas, sings "Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" (refrain from "For unto Us a Child Is Born" from Handel's *Messiah*). Choir group B, smaller in numbers than group A and dressed in shepherds' robes, sings *More Voices* #146, "The Kingdom of God." The two refrains are repeated alternately several times, building tension and a sense of competition between them.

**Person from group A:** What? Wait a minute! Who are you singing about?

**Group B:** Jesus of Nazareth!

**Person from group B:** Why? Who are you singing about?

**Group A:** Caesar, of course!

(Group A angrily chases Group B from the stage.)

### HEARING THE STORY (voices 1, 2, 3)

(from Matthew 2:1–3, 12–18)

**Voice 2:** In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking,

**Several voices in unison:** “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”

**Voice 3:** “For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him...

**Voice 1:** Sure, we know this part. This is where the gifts come in.

**Voice 3:** Okay then, here comes the part we usually leave out of the story.

**Voice 2:** And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. 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.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 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.”

**Voice 1:** Wait, that sounds like Jesus was a refugee!

**Voice 3:** Yes, that’s right. And there’s more to the story.

**Voice 2:** When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

**Voice 3:** “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

**Voice 1:** So much for a sweet little story about a newborn baby! But why would the writer of the Gospel of Matthew tell such a story, and right at the beginning? And what was all that about singing to Caesar?

### MUSICAL INTERLUDE

A brief, non-verbal time for reflection

### STORY REFLECTION (voices 4, 5)

**Voice 4:** The Hebrew people had almost always lived under the control of powerful nations around them. It was only for one brief period, when David was king, that Israel was a unified, strong country. But the occupation of the Roman Empire, which began in 27 BCE, was like no other. Jesus was born in a time of rebellion against Roman rule. The Jews were a conquered people. The context of Jesus' time was the brutal oppression of occupied Palestine under the Roman Empire.

**Voice 5:** Approximately 30 years before the birth of Jesus, Emperor Caesar Augustus solidified the Roman Empire and brought an end to civil war. He brought peace and prosperity to the upper crust of society, and maintained it through military domination and economic repression of the masses. New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan says that Caesar was hailed as Lord, Saviour, Redeemer, Liberator, Divine, Son of God, God, and God from God. It was not uncommon in surrounding cultures for rulers to be made gods.

**Voice 4:** What was unheard of, and treasonous, was for those same qualities and titles to be used in relationship to a peasant nobody from Galilee. For the writer of the Gospel of Matthew to call Jesus "king of the Jews" and for the heart of the message of Jesus to be about the "kingdom of God" was in direct opposition to the kingdom of Caesar. From the very start of the Gospel, Matthew's story is showing the kind of reaction this alternative vision will cause.

**Voice 5:** The Roman-supported puppet ruler, Herod, was indeed fearful at the thought of the birth of a new king of the Jews. There is no historical evidence to support the story of children two and under being murdered by his order. Yet what is known of Herod certainly validates its possibility. He ruled with political shrewdness and ruthless cruelty.

**Voice 4:** Joseph's dreams save his family, but the horrific violence that surrounds them, the death of little children, wailing and loud lamentation, foreshadow Jesus' crucifixion. Death is already a part of the story even while Jesus is an infant.

## HYMN

*More Voices #111 "A Voice Was Heard in Ramah"*

## A STORY FROM HISTORY (voices 6, 7)

**Voice 6:** Most of what we know about the life of Jesus comes from the Bible, from the four gospels. But we also have a few sources that tell us about the historical setting and events that happened in Judea around the time of Jesus, which shed light on the gospel stories.

**Voice 7:** Upon the death of Herod in 4 BCE, uprisings broke out in various parts of Judea. One such revolt occurred in Sepphoris, the largest city in Galilee. Although it is not mentioned in scripture, it was less than one hour's walk from Nazareth. Nazareth no doubt belonged to the territory of Sepphoris.

**Voice 6:** The Roman governor of Syria, Varus, responded swiftly to the revolt. His legions sacked Sepphoris, reduced the city to ashes, and sold its inhabitants as slaves.

**Voice 7:** Surely, these events at Sepphoris must have impacted the young family in Nazareth.

## HYMN

*More Voices #134 "There Was a Child in Galilee"*

## A CONGREGATIONAL REFLECTION

(voices 8, 9, 10, 11)

**Voice 8:** Can you imagine what it must have been like for Mary as a very young, unmarried, pregnant girl? By law she could have been stoned to death. She must have felt so alone in the world. (pause)

**Voice 9:** Women, young girls, children in occupied or war-torn countries today suffer the ravages and cruelties of war.

**Congregation: Can we imagine?**

**Voice 10:** Can you imagine what it was like for Mary and Joseph to flee their homeland to save their young son? (pause)

**Voice 11:** Can you imagine what conditions drive people today to leave their homes, their families, all that is familiar? (pause)

**Congregation: Can we imagine?**

**Voice 8:** Can you imagine the remorse, agony, perhaps even guilt that Mary and Joseph might have felt over all the babies who weren't able to escape the wrath of Herod? (pause)

**Voice 9:** According to the United Nations, a refugee is a person who flees their home country due to a "well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion." A recent UN estimate is that there are over 15.2 million people worldwide who are refugees. (pause)

**Congregation: Can we imagine?**

**Voice 10:** The Hebrew people had once been slaves in Egypt. Yet Joseph and Mary took the infant Jesus to Egypt, fleeing from persecution in their own homeland. What kind of racial prejudice might they have encountered in Egypt? Can you imagine?

**Voice 11:** Today, Bethlehem is in occupied territory. Because of the long-standing situation in the Middle East, if Jesus were born in Bethlehem today, it would be impossible for his family to flee to Egypt. There are currently 4.8 million Palestinian refugees. Can you imagine?

## THE STORY CONTINUES (voices 2, 3)

(Matthew 2:19–23)

**Voice 2:** When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a

dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

**Voice 3:** Going home is not usually an option for refugees today. Lifetimes, sometimes generations of lifetimes, are spent as refugees. Can you imagine?

### HYMN

*Voices United #5 "All Earth Is Waiting"*

### CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSE (voices 1, 6, 7)

**Voice 1:** So where is the hope? the joy? What is the good news in this story?

**Voice 6:** Perhaps we are! Can you imagine?

**Voice 7:** For the companions of Jesus, the good news was and is that there is an alternative to the oppressive empire of Rome and the powers of empire in our world today. The vision of the kingdom of heaven is a non-violent resistance to powers of greed, injustice, suffering, and oppression. It is the belief that God is engaged in the pursuit of justice, which gives us strength and courage and calls on us to engage in that struggle. The empire of God, the kingdom of God, calls for a reordering of human values and relationships. It puts people who are least valued by society at the very centre.

**Voice 1:** So when we value and uphold the lives of people—especially those whom our neighbours, government, and society ignore, shun, and despise—we are living out the kingdom of God.

**Congregation: Can we imagine?**

### HYMN

*More Voices #120 "My Soul Cries Out"*

### OFFERING (voice 8)

**Voice 8:** Although Jesus never explicitly names the Roman Empire in scripture, the inherent tension can most certainly be felt in his admonition to "give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). Let us bring now what rightly belongs to God.

### PRAYER OF DEDICATION (voice 9)

**Voice 9:** There is nothing, Lord, that is beyond the bounds of your realm. Bless our coins, bills, cheques, and PAR payments to your kingdom's glory.

### PRAYERS (voice 10)

**Voice 10:** Jesus, the refugee child, as we focus today on your story and call to mind the reality of people of the world in places we can hardly name, we too often feel that the

numbers are staggering, the circumstances beyond our imagination. Our tendency is to shield our eyes and turn away.

**Congregation: Jesus, refugee child, forgive us.**

**Voice 10:** But forgiving us is not enough. Rather than forgiving so that we can forget, disturb us so that we cannot forget. Give us the courage of conviction in our confession of your kingdom so that our joy may be in serving you by serving others.

And while we pray, as we so routinely do, the prayer that bears your name, awaken us to the radical commitment for which we pray. Our Father...

### **BLESSING (voice 11)**

**Voice 11:** May the hope, peace, love, and joy of this season dwell deep within your soul now and forever. Amen.

### **HYMN**

*Voices United #59 "Joy To The World"*

**Martha Nell Thomson** is retired United Church clergy and is currently Vice-Chair of Montreal City Mission's governing body. Montreal City Mission is a community ministry celebrating 100 years of hospitality, compassion, and justice in the heart of the city.