


Our God Is Undocumented

Biblical Faith and Immigrant Justice

Ched Myers and Matthew Colwell

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Gospel Nativities vs. Anti-Immigrant Nativism

Ched Myers

*And he arose and took the Child and his
mother by night, and departed to Egypt. (Mt 2:14)*

The popular version of the Christmas story that is sung in carols and portrayed in church manger scenes throughout North America has become so domesticated that it offers little antidote to the consumer frenzy of our holiday celebrations. It is also a highly selective conflation of the two gospel accounts of Jesus' birth, which in fact have few details in common. Yet Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2 agree on a basic theme that is almost entirely obscured by sentimentalized Christmas pageantry: that God slips quietly into a world of brutal rulers and hard-pressed refugees, and that only a few unheralded people manage to recognize the presence and act conscientiously.

The biographical literature of Roman antiquity, much like the “infotainment” media in our culture, focused almost exclusively upon rich and famous personalities as its subjects. The gospels, in contrast, feature poor folk as the true protagonists of history. The central characters in the

Christmas story are a rural peasant couple displaced by powerful political, economic, and military forces in Roman Palestine that they cannot understand. Maria and Jose are far from pious superheroes—indeed, the legitimacy of the child is in question (Mt 1:18f), and their low social status is indicated by their inability to procure lodging when in desperate straits (Lk 2:7). But they are spiritually powerful, sensitive to dreams (Mt 1:22–23, 2:15, 2:23) and visions (Lk 1:26ff).

The Holy Family is distinguished by the courage to endure harsh conditions (Maria gives birth in a barn; Lk 2:16) and to make hard choices (fleeing the country; Mt 1:14–15). Surrounding them, meanwhile, is a dubious and obscure cast of characters: elderly crones (Lk 1:5–25, 2:25–38), caring relatives (Lk 1:39ff), strange foreign emissaries (Mt 2:1f), animal herdsman (Lk 2:8–20), and fellow refugees (Mt 2:16–18). Yet they are also accompanied by mysterious heavenly messengers, who offer startling interpretations of these obscure events at the margins of history, suggesting that somehow Maria's back-alley birthing will pose a sharp challenge to the dominating colonial rule of Caesar (Lk 2:9–14) and Herod (Mt 2:3–6).

These biblical nativity stories, in their focus on the improvisational struggle for life by people of conscience in the midst of overbearing imperial strategies of death, can serve as an alternative moral compass not only during the Christmas season, but for discerning what immigrant justice means today. To help us see the connections, I will read these stories in conversation with how they have been appropriated by Latino culture.

Baby Jesus, Refugee: Matthew's Story

Matthew's birth narrative is composed around three elements:

1. a genealogy (1:1–17);
2. Jose's dreams (1:18–25, 2:13–15, 2:19–23); and
3. the murderous plotting of King Herod (2:1–12, 2:16–18).

The latter two are woven together into five “scenes,” which constitute the first “act” in the theater of the first gospel. Each scene turns on a citation from the Hebrew Bible:

1. Matthew 1:18–25: Jesus' birth, Jose's first dream (1:23; Is 7:14);
2. Matthew 2:1–12: Herod, Child and Magi, Jose's second dream (2:6; Mi 5:2);
3. Matthew 2:13–15: The Holy Family's flight (2:15; Hos 11:1);
4. Matthew 2:16–18: Herod's reaction (2:17f; Jer 31:15); and
5. Matthew 2:19–23: Return to Nazareth, Jose's third dream (2:23; Is 11:1).

By relating the events surrounding Jesus' birth to the prophetic tradition, the evangelist seeks to strengthen credibility and anchor the events in the wider scope of salvation history. The three dream sequences are a literary vehicle with much the same function and are identical in structure. Each time a deteriorating plot is interrupted by an angel

who appears to Jose (Mt 1:20, 2:13, 2:19). The angel issues a command, along with its rationale; Jose then “gets up” and obeys (1:24f, 2:14f, 2:21). These revelations signal that YHWH is intimately involved on the side of the weak and disenfranchised in a struggle with the powers (represented by Herod) for true sovereignty.

It is easy to skip over those boring “begats” that form the prologue to Matthew’s Nativity story, but this “family tree” has a few surprises—and a lot to say about how God works in history. In traditional societies, persons derive their identity from their clan, in stark contrast to the individualism of modern culture. Matthew’s ancestral roll call would have been the normal and expected way to introduce and commend Jesus to his Jewish audience. The genealogy comes in three parts (see 1:17), invoking each major epoch in the saga of Israel: the patriarchal era (Abraham et al. 1:1–6), the monarchy (David et al. 1:6–11), and the exile and restoration (Mt 1:12–16).

But it is the way in which Matthew *departs* from a strictly patriarchal family line that captures our attention. Five women, inclusive of Mary, appear in the list; even more disturbing to tradition is the fact that these are women of “dubious” character. Tamar (1:13) posed as a prostitute in order to compel Judah into fulfilling his obligations according to the customs of Levirate marriage (Gn 38). Rahab (Mt 1:5) ran a Canaanite brothel but saved Joshua and his spies by hiding them and then lying to royal security forces in Jericho (Jo 2). Ruth (Mt 1:5) was a Moabite who seduced Boaz to gain entry to his clan (Ru 3). And the “wife of Uriah” (Bathsheeba; Mt 1:6) was the object of King David’s infamous adultery and murderous cover-up (2 Sm 11). It appears that Matthew intentionally associates Maria, the

peasant-girl mother of Jesus (Mt 1:16), with other women of “unusual” sexual circumstances—and the first scene of the drama explains why.

In first-century Jewish culture, marriage was arranged between families. A “contract of consent” was drawn up when the girl was about thirteen; she then continued to live at home for up to a year, until she was “transferred” to her husband’s house and support. It is during this time of “betrothal” that Mary is found to be pregnant (1:18). Because Torah required that adultery be punished with stoning (Dt 22:20f), Jose refuses to make this a public issue and plans instead to divorce without pressing charges (Mt 1:19). At this point he has his first dream, in which he is instructed not only to go forward with the transfer of Maria to his house, but to become the legal father of the child. To name Jesus publicly functions as an acknowledgement of paternity—effectively “covering” for the Holy Spirit! And Isaiah’s royal moniker, “Emmanuel,” puts this act firmly in a political context (1:23; Is 7:14).

In light of the implied village scandal, Matthew’s twists to the genealogy suggest that he does not necessarily assume the credulity of his audience. While believers may affirm the virgin birth of Jesus, Matthew recognizes that the *appearance* of Jesus’ illegitimacy remains. He, too, is “covering” for the Spirit, placing Maria in an extraordinary line of women who, despite (or perhaps because of) questionable circumstances, have played key roles in liberation history. Indeed, the next episode will allude back to the extraordinary conspiracy of women who rescued the prophet Moses from an imperial pogrom (Ex 1). This reminds us of a central truth of incarnational theology: God’s redemptive purpose works in and through real human situations, in

all their ambiguity—*especially* through courageous women willing to defy oppressive social conventions in order to embrace the alternative vision of God.

Matthew 2 turns to the story of Herod and the Holy Family, a narrative full of violence and risk. Matthew's account presents an archetypal portrait of a paranoid tyrant, a description that could well fit either Herod the Great (who died either in 4 or 1 BCE) or his successor sons who ruled in the region of the story: Archelaus (ethnarch of Samaria, Judea, and Edom from 4 BCE to 6 CE) and Antipas (tetrarch of Galilee and Perea from 4 BCE to 39 CE). Richard Horsley writes: "Quite apart from any particular incident that may underlie it, the story portrays a network of historical relationships that prevailed in the general circumstance of the birth of the messiah" (1989, 40). He details how the Herodians served Rome's interests in colonial Palestine, oppressing their own people with taxes to fund grandiose building projects, and "instituted what today would be called a police-state, complete with loyalty oaths, surveillance, informers, secret police, imprisonment, torture and brutal retaliation against any serious dissenter" (46f). Horsley concludes: "Matthew 2 comes to life vividly against the background of Herodian exploitation and tyranny" (49).

Matthew's narrative is also inspired, however, by two stories from the Hebrew Bible, which add deeper layers of political critique. The first allusion is to Numbers 22–23, in which the Canaanite king Balak summons the prophet Balaam "from the east" (Nm 23:7) to curse Israel (22:6), only to be betrayed when Balaam instead pronounces blessing (23:8ff). In Matthew, Herod is double-crossed by Magi "from the east," whom he had employed to locate Jesus

the child-king (ostensibly to “bless” him; Mt 2:1ff). At issue here is political legitimacy. The astrologers seek a star, a cosmic symbol in antiquity signaling the birth of a great leader. Herod, the client despot, is understandably disturbed that these foreigners have named the child “King of the Jews” (2:1–2)—Herod’s own title! The incipient challenge to his hegemony is deepened when Herod’s assembled advisers remind him of the prophetic oracle promising that a Messianic ruler will come from “one of the little clans of Judah” (2:4–6; Mi 5:2).

As is the way of the powerful (then and now), Herod cloaks his sinister “counterinsurgency” plan in pious pretense: he wishes to “pay homage” to the Child (Mt 2:8). The astrologers, however, are not fooled. Finding Jesus, they offer him gifts befitting true political authority, thereby rendering their allegiance, then turn heel and slip out of the country. Horsley provides fascinating historical context for the *magoi*, who were “originally a caste of highest ranking politico-religious advisers or officers of the Median emperor, then in the Persian imperial court” (1989, 53). These sages and seers wielded legendary political influence, which explains why in earliest Christian tradition they were portrayed both as “wise men” and “kings.” More importantly, *magoi* may well “have been instrumental in opposing the Hellenistic imperial forces that conquered them and other ancient Near Eastern peoples. . . . Throughout the first century CE, there was a continuing confrontation if not outright war between the Romans and the Parthian empire to the East. It is not difficult to imagine that the Magi would have been associated with the eastern empire in opposition to Rome” (55f). Their actions in Matthew are, therefore, both conscientious *and* politically subversive.

For a second time, Jose receives instructions in a dream (Mt 2:13). Matthew shapes the character of Jesus' father after the great patriarch Joseph, who was called "the dreamer" and went away to Egypt (Gn 37)—which is precisely where the Holy Family flees to escape Herod's wrath (Mt 2:14). So does the savior of the world begin life as a political refugee.

These actions of holy obedience are at the same time risky acts of political *disobedience*, and call to mind a second story from the Hebrew Bible. Exodus 1–2 narrates the birth of Moses, whose life is similarly threatened by a paranoid potentate, and also saved by an "underground railroad." The parallels between Pharaoh and Herod are uncanny: the challenge of an infant unleashes a policy of infanticide—justified by "national security" (Ex 1:16–20). Royal attempts to work through accomplices (Pharaoh's midwives, Herod's astrologers) fail, however, because these characters choose life and are prepared to deceive their superiors in order to protect the innocent. We never again hear of these role players—yet upon their acts of costly conscience hangs the whole of the biblical drama. Dare we assume that our own choices, minor characters though we also be, are any less consequential? And does not Matthew's story cast a new light on experiments in faith and immigrant justice such as the New Sanctuary Movement (see Chapter 3)?

As we shall see in the next section, the gospel nativity stories are deeply significant to the culture of Mexican America, in large part because they speak so poignantly to Latino realities. For example, midway through the Advent season, the Feast of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is celebrated (December 12). Guadalupe is the patroness of indigenous peasants displaced by Spanish colonization, who clearly

identified herself with the “abandoned” ones. Her image in Catholic iconography represents an extraordinary, eclectic affirmation of both Catholic and Aztec religious symbolism (see Elizondo 2002) and is important to Latinos throughout the U.S. Southwest (it was carried by farmworker organizer Cesar Chavez in all his marches).

But Guadalupe is portrayed in a fashion that, for the biblically literate, is also germane to Matthew’s Nativity story. Her famous image is based on the apocalyptic “portent” seen by John the Revelator in the middle of his evocative visionary cycles:

A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth. Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon. . . . Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. And she gave birth to a son. (Rv 12:1–5)

The dragon is a master symbol used by John, a political prisoner in the late first century CE, to represent the lethal violence of the Roman Empire. The dragon’s intent to “devour the child” is a clear allusion to both Matthew’s gospel tale of Herod and the old Exodus story of Pharaoh. Like the mother of Moses and Maria of Nazareth, Revelation’s “woman clothed with the sun” gives birth to a child in the teeth of the Beast, nurturing life in defiance of the power of death. Guadalupe stands for, and with, all those who do the same under the shadow of a different empire today.

In Matthew's narrative the empire inevitably strikes back, and the slaughter of innocents ensues (Mt 2:16ff). The Bible is so much clearer than we are about the violent realities of Statecraft! "Rachel weeps" (Mt 2:17f; Jer 31:14) over such an absurd mismatch: kings vs. kids! Yet such is the paradox of biblical history. As imperial minds plot genocide, God's messengers enter the world at risk: floating down the Nile in a reed basket (Ex 2:3), spirited out of the country on back roads (Mt 2:14). Against the presence of power is pitted the power of presence: God with us.

This terrible tale is commemorated in the Feast of the Holy Innocents on December 28. Not well-known by North American Christians, it was instituted by the Latin Church in the fifth century, perhaps anticipating that the Nativity season would become too sentimentalized, too innocuous, and too triumphal in a comfortable Christendom (how right it was!). So this feast was wisely instituted to preserve the "underside" of the Christmas story, a sharp counterpoint to pious pageantry.

The Feast of the Holy Innocents offers a grim reminder that there was and is a political cost to the incarnation—that Jesus was born not in a palace but in a feed trough to parents who were refugees, not royalty. The Bible is clear from beginning to end that the principalities and powers—represented by corporate managers and political operatives and military strategists in every age—are forever threatened by the God who invades our world from below. In the name of national security, suspects (and all others who fit the profile) must be contained and neutralized, undocumented people criminalized as potential "terrorist threats." The result: "A voice is heard in Ramah"—the sound of women mourning their children.

The somber feast interrupts our year-end reveling with the discomfoting thought that behind the obfuscating rhetoric of “regime change” or “sealing our borders” is the terrible reality of human lives caught in the crossfire or expiring in the desert. It is disproportionately women and children on the business end of our security sweeps, surgical strikes, and deportation campaigns. Perhaps this is why the Feast of the Holy Innocents is routinely ignored by our churches as an inconvenient intrusion of both Word and World on our insular holiday feasting. But because infants continue to be victimized by emperors, it is a painful and importunate gift to have a feast day that invites us to—no, demands that we—remember the suffering of innocents that continues from the horn of Africa to the Amazon, and from Gaza to the U.S.-Mexico border. Coming just before our year-in-review rituals and our New Year’s resolution making, it challenges us to include in our purview the lives of those who are at risk. The Christ child bids us live with eyes wide open to a world full of disappeared, homeless, trafficked, and traumatized children, so many of whom are immigrants.

Matthew’s Nativity tale concludes with Jose’s third and final dream (2:19–23). Herod’s death allows a return to Palestine, but the danger remains, and the Holy Family settles in an obscure frontier village. It is there at the margins that Jesus grows up, until the day he will commence his public mission to face down the powers once and for all.

This Christmas story is a much-needed, if painful, corrective to the holiday season’s saccharine spirituality and cacophonous commercialism. Matthew speaks frankly about political violence, displacement, and danger—which is to say, of real life as it is for the poor. Here is a story for *our*

world, which still teems with refugees, lamenting mothers, and the duplicitous schemes of the powerful. But *this* is the world in which God is with us, into which God has come and yet will come. The only question is, will *we* recognize the presence and act accordingly?

Posadas sin Fronteras: Luke's Story

It is a few nights before Christmas 1994. A small group of us are singing timidly, clutching candles against a chilly drizzle. We slowly make our way up a muddy hill. Below us an orange glow floats like fog above the border checkpoint at San Ysidro, CA. "*En nombre del cielo, les pido posada,*" sings an unseen group on the Tijuana side of the border fence. "*Pues no puede andar mi esposa amada*" ("In the name of Heaven I beg you for lodging, for my beloved wife cannot walk"). Between us is a menacing ten-foot high metal wall, donated to the U.S. Border Patrol by the Pentagon after Desert Storm—one war's surplus bolstering another war's front lines. We respond: "*Aquí no es mesón; sigan adelante. Yo no puedo abrir; no sea algun tunante*" ("This is not an inn, so keep going. I cannot open, for you may be bad people").

We are celebrating the first "*Posada sin Fronteras.*" The idea came from the late Roberto Martinez, a colleague in the American Friends Service Committee who worked tirelessly on immigrant human rights in and around San Diego. Roberto introduced me to the tough landscape of these borderlands, from the sweaty *maquiladoras* to the canyons where farmworkers live in caves and plastic tents in the shadow of affluent trophy homes. He became legendary for his documentation of hundreds of Border Patrol abuses each year, ranging from verbal abuse, illegal confiscation of

documents, and deportation of legal residents to maimings, rapes, and deaths in pursuit or in custody (see Chapter 10).

Always looking for fresh ways to communicate the stories he saw daily, Roberto suggested that perhaps a *Posada* could be held at the border fence to recontextualize the bitter drama of immigrant homelessness. The old Catholic tradition of *Las Posadas* (“lodging, shelter”) is celebrated each Advent throughout the Southwest to commemorate Luke’s story of Maria and Jose’s difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem in search of shelter. A procession through the *barrio* is usually led by a child dressed as an angel, followed by musicians and people carrying figures of Maria and Jose. At an appointed house, the group divides in two, and a poignant litany is recited or sung at the threshold; then the doors are opened and a *fiesta* ensues.

Roberto’s idea became the seed of the “*Posada sin Fronteras*,” reimagined by church and immigrant rights activists from Tijuana and San Diego. Groups gather on both sides of the wall, watched carefully by the Border Patrol and, more recently, by anti-immigrant counterprotestors. The U.S. side recites the role of the innkeeper in the litany, the Mexican side that of the Holy Family—and the story comes uncomfortably alive right at the heart of the border war zone. This powerful public liturgy has continued each year since that inaugural experiment in 1994.

We hold aloft three large piñatas representing Maria, Jose, and the innkeeper. For as far as we can see, the no-man’s-land of the border is bathed by floodlights, and thick with U.S. Border Patrol vehicles and helicopters. These “innkeepers” spend millions of taxpayer dollars in an effort to reduce illegal entries across this, the world’s most heavily used border crossing, one of the only places on earth

where first and third world lay side by side. Their mission is to keep out the very ones who, more than a century earlier, were expressly invited *into* the United States in the extraordinary verse of the immigrant poet Emma Lazarus inscribed on the Statue of Liberty.

Give me your tired, your poor,
 Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
 The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

But what immigrants and economic refugees see first today at this new portal is not the hospitable face of a woman holding aloft that lamp, but rather the stern face of heavily armed Border guards, intent on apprehending, incarcerating, and deporting the “homeless and tempest-tossed.” So at this conflicted, contested, and increasingly militarized door, activists gather to reenact the old, sacred story about how God struggles to enter a world of hard-hearted inhospitality.

The refrain of Jose resounds from across the wall: “*No seas inhumano; ténnos caridad. Que el Dios de los cielos te lo pagará*” (“Don’t be inhuman; have mercy on us. The God of the heavens will reward you for it.”). We sing the traditional *Posadas* litany back and forth across the wall hearing but not seeing one another. To symbolize our solidarity, green ribbons are passed through small holes in the fence. “We pray that the day will come when we can have this *Posada* truly without borders,” says a local Bishop to the crowd. “If we reject the poor, we are rejecting Jesus Christ himself.” Turning up the collar of my coat against the cold, I marvel at this liturgy of resistance to this wall that runs right through

the heart of this congregation—and of our church and nation. It is precisely this nontraditional geography that brings this old pageantry painfully alive again.

“*Ya se pueden ir, y no molestar,*” threatens the innkeeper’s verse. “*Porque si me enojo les voy a pegar*” (“Better go on, and don’t bother us. For if I become angry, I shall beat you up.”). Behind us a knot of Border Patrol officers keep a watchful eye, as an activist colleague next to me laments about the trend of increased Border Patrol abuses. When the liturgy finishes, doves are released and fly off, unrestrained by the metal fence, a small sign of hope amidst this free fire zone in the war against the poor, the New Global Economic Order’s Berlin Wall.

Las Posadas remembers Luke’s story of a poor couple, pregnant with a prophet, who became homeless because of the push and pull of imperial forces. At its heart is the litany, a conversation that putatively takes place through a closed door. It is a tense, dramatic exchange between insiders and outsiders. The door represents the ultimate liminal space, the threshold between home and homelessness (see Chapter 3 above). At the border fence it becomes a sort of community theater in real political space that takes on an almost unbearable poignancy, bearing witness to immigrant suffering. And the more we know about the social and literary character of Luke’s nativity, the more relevant and subversive this theater becomes.

Luke’s birth narrative opens and closes with Temple vignettes about elderly couples who are waiting patiently for God’s intervention in their tired history: Zechariah and Elizabeth (Lk 1:5–25) and Simeon and Anna (2:25–38). But Luke has a gendered “edge”: at the outset a male priest is silenced (1:5–23), while two women pregnant

with prophets take center stage, encouraging one another and embodying faith (1:24–45). And the last word in Luke’s Christmas story also belongs to a woman, the prophet Anna (2:36–38).

The long tradition of singing carols during Christmas is rooted in Luke’s account, which is composed around three canticles: Mary’s “Magnificat” (1:46–55), Zechariah’s “Benedictus” (1:68–79), and Simeon’s “Nunc Dimittis” (2:29–32). These traditional titles (derived from the opening words of each song in Latin) should not obscure the fact that each is a fierce chant of nationalist hope by oppressed Jews into the teeth of the violent Roman occupation of Palestine. The Magnificat (based upon the ancient “Song of Hannah”; 1 Sm 2:1–10), is a stirring revolutionary hymn that envisions YHWH’s liberation of Israel and a radical social and political leveling (Lk1:51–55)! And when Zechariah (Lk 1:79) and Simeon (2:29) sing of “peace,” it is *not* referring to the “Pax Romana” but the subversive peace mission of a marginalized Messiah.

Of all the evangelists, Luke gives the most detail about the political context of the Jesus story. The events occur during the reign of “Caesar Augustus” and “Quirinius the governor of Syria” (2:1f), and later the rule of Tiberius, Pilate, and Herod (3:1f). Luke wants his reader to be clear that *this* story is taking place in real political time and space—something often lost on modern North American readers, who imagine the gospel as a cosmic drama with no real terrestrial tether. But as soon as Luke has named the imperial officials who *think* they are in charge of history, he immediately swings his focus on to the poor people who will *change* history: the obscure Jose (2:4), and the fiery wilderness prophet John the Baptist (3:2).

The Holy Family is pulled from their home by the empire's demand for a census (2:1). Residents of Palestine were compelled to travel to the village of their ancestors to be counted so that they could better be "managed" by the Roman military government (2:3f). In Luke's account of Jose's unwilling journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, there is an obvious implication typically ignored by interpreters. The fact that he is denied lodging in Bethlehem can mean only one thing: every one of Jose's kin had *also* been displaced from their hometown by the political and economic forces of empire. This is how Maria ends up giving birth to Jesus in a feed trough, accompanied by animals and their herders (2:7). (Such displacement continues for Palestinians in Bethlehem today, a town that is divided and locked down by an Israeli security wall even more formidable than the one at the U.S.-Mexico border.)

The birth of a "Savior and Lord" (2:11) is accompanied by the angelic host singing "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace" (2:14). Though these phrases are mere Christmas card greetings today, they were originally highly political, applied exclusively to Caesar Augustus. Moreover, this "good news" is entrusted not to political and religious leaders, but to a group of anonymous shepherds—a class of workers considered "unclean" and unreliable by polite society of the time (2:8, 15–20). Just as Matthew's story opposes Jesus' "rule" to Herod's, so Luke heralds a political challenge to Rome. No wonder Luke includes a "reality check": this new vision will be opposed by many, and will have a cost (2:34–35).

After the "epilogue" to Luke's nativity tale (2:41–52), Jose disappears from the story—whether it is an early death by poverty or jailing by the military we are not told—so

that Jesus is brought up in a single parent home (see 4:22). It is little wonder then that Jesus would emphasize in his later teaching the very thing he was denied at birth: hospitality, which he insists should be extended to *all* people, even one's enemies (see 7:1–9, 23:42f)!

The scenario we enact in a *Posada* tells us a lot about the struggle of poor folk across the ages to survive the social disruption wrought by empire. It certainly resonates with the experiences of those who tell their stories each year at the *Posada sin Fronteras*, who have been pulled from villages in Oaxaca or Zacatecas, Chalatenango or Morazan, Jalapa or Coban. They testify to long, arduous journeys that have brought them to the Mexican side of the border fence, only to face the most dangerous crossing. And if that is successful, an uncertain future awaits them in a country increasingly hostile to their presence—even as it is increasingly dependent upon their low wage labor.

The traditional *Posadas* litany has a happy ending: in the ritual, the innkeeper finally recognizes the Holy Family, and intones, “Enter, holy pilgrims, receive this corner, for though this dwelling is poor, I offer it with all my heart.” “Blessed is the house that today offers protection,” comes Jose’s response, “blessed is this house that gives us shelter.” This is not, of course, what happens at the border *Posada*. Instead, the door remains closed; all participants can do as they shower each other with sweets thrown over the wall, is to make solemn commitments to bring that wall down—and just as importantly, to refuse to let it be internalized in our hearts.

A few years ago we celebrated *Las Posadas* on the border just days after federal agents had raided meat-processing plants in six states. In a new wrinkle in the war on immigrants, Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents

charged undocumented workers with “identity-theft,” in order to exonerate the company and scapegoat the workers. To criminalize undocumented immigrants—already the most vulnerable among us from both an economic and human rights perspective—is to willfully obscure not only the deeper and wider issues of justice, but also the root cause. The push and pull of empire that displaced the Holy Family still forces people to leave their homes in order to survive. Identity theft? It is we who have lost our identity as immigrant peoples and as Christians who follow a refugee Messiah. Yet the spirit of *Las Posadas* remains alive, for some local people in the Midwest opened their homes to the children of workers taken into custody in those raids, and a few police even refused to cooperate with the sweeps. In those moments, the gospel of Nativity trumped the ideology of nativism!

The *Posadas sin Fronteras* public liturgy is now spreading to different sites along the border. The simple act of relocating worship into contested political space recovers the Nativity as a *real-world* saga. It rescues Christmas from its trivialization by spiritualizing pietism and relentless commercialism, while compelling us to confront the hardships so familiar to those forced to become “sojourners” in order to support their families. For those of us who are privileged in a world of violence and exclusion, hearing the pleas of the “José” on the other side of the border fence, and having to take on the role of the hard-hearted *casero* (innkeeper) in the *Posadas* litany, is searing to heart and conscience. It animates us to rediscover what it means to raise the lamp of prophetic hospitality beside the no-longer-Golden American Door. This *is* the Christmas story, then and now, and we Christians need to get it right.

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