

**A Child Shall Lead:
A Refugee's Journey
Matthew 2:13-23**

Bana Alabed is a 7-year-old girl with an active Twitter account and over 360,000 followers. This may seem a bit unusual (especially for one so young to start tweeting), but Bana's ongoing tweets have a worldwide audience. She's been featured in Time magazine, on both NBC and CBS News, and on the BBC and Canadian Broadcasting. The reason for such interest? Bana Alabed has been tweeting from her home in Aleppo, Syria.

Bana began tweeting earlier in the fall when her mother, Fatemah, a Syrian English-language teacher and amateur journalist, wanted the world to know what life was like in rebel-occupied eastern Aleppo. From what they could tell, the world had overlooked the human tragedy of thousands of civilians being slaughtered by forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, while Russian war planes were bombing the neighborhoods of their city. Both mother and daughter were putting a human face on the Syrian civil war that has already claimed nearly a half- million lives.

Bana's seven-year-old perspective on war struck at the heart of the tragedy. Her first tweet on September 24 read: "I need peace." That sentiment was repeated hundreds of times in a multitude of ways over the next several weeks:

I can't go out because of the bombing, please stop bombing.

Aleppo is very good city but we need peace. I want to live like a child but instead I am stressed now.

I'm very afraid of the planes now when I hear them. Dark night and very dangerous Aleppo. I pray tonight will be calm for me and all.

I want to wake up from this horrible dream that I'm living in the morning and evening.

Next neighbor house burning now. My house could be next now. Mr. Putin, Assad, Why?

So many bombs, just like rain.

Good afternoon from Aleppo. I'm reading to forget the war.

Praying here in Aleppo as I hear bomb fall. My soul can be taken anytime.

[photo displayed] This is my friend house bombed. I miss her so much.

I miss school so much.

Was your day good, my friends? Good night.

My friends, this [light in the sky] is not the moon, this is bomb falling right now. Please pray for us tonight. I am afraid.

Good morning from Aleppo. We are still alive.

The author, J.K. Rowling, became a Twitter friend of Bana's and sent copies of her books for Bana to download.

Hello, my friend, @jk_rowling. I started reading your books now, my heart is for you. Thank you. Bana

My brothers want to read the Harry Potters too.

Oh dear world, I am crying tonight. [Displays photo] This is my friend killed by a bomb tonight. I can't stop crying.

[Nov. 27] Tonight we have no house. It's bombed & I got in rubble. I saw deaths and I almost died.

This is our house. My beloved dolls died in the bombing of our house. I am very sad, but happy to be alive.

[Dec. 13] My name is Bana. I am 7 years old. I am talking to the world now live from East #Aleppo. This is my last moment to either live or die. -Bana

[Dec. 19] I escaped East #Aleppo. -Bana

[Dec. 25] I am a child with something to say. And that's let's help every child in war zone. -Bana

[Dec. 29] Last day in #Aleppo. I will return one day.

When I checked on Friday, Bana and her family are in the Syrian countryside near the Turkish border. They are apparently safe and will be able to flee as refugees into Turkey, like over a million other Syrians. Some have successfully emigrated to other parts of the Middle East, Europe, Africa, or to North America, though many remain in UN-sponsored refugee camps. The politics of terrorism have complicated the passage of those who will become like so many other war refugees—homeless, without a place to settle until it is safe to return home.

In the last year, over 500 Syrian refugees have come through the two-year vetting process and resettled here in Connecticut—several families here in the New London area. They are sponsored by individual congregations and an interfaith refugee resettlement commitment, working with IRIS, Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services out of New Haven. We will continue to be involved in this endeavor because of the plight of Syrian refugees and their need for safety. The Syrian people are not our enemy.

Bana's story is particularly poignant in these days because it embodies a part of the Christmas story. We often focus almost entirely on the events leading up to the birth of Jesus, and overlook what Matthew tells us about the meaning of the Christ child in the context of the pain and suffering of the ancient world, with relevance to what that means to us today. What Bana represents is not only the struggle for civilians caught in the Syrian crossfire, as Matthew would tell it she also embodies the face of Christ to us today.

According to Matthew, the initial months of Jesus' life and story are representative of those who are persecuted by militant powers and the

tyranny of rulers, who escape for their safety like so many refugees throughout history, and who return home yearning to find hope again in a beleaguered land. Herod's slaughter of the innocents depicts a terrible tragedy, but one that unfortunately is all too real in the annals of history. The flight to Egypt, as well, is symbolic of those who have been uprooted and displaced from their homeland. It was true in Israel's own history of exile and conquest, it was evident in Jesus' own time with rebel movements trying to valiantly resist the dominant imperial power of Herod and Caesar. The story rings true in their return from Egypt, much like the Israelites in the Exodus, much like their return from Babylon, much like Israel's experience since 1948, much like refugees throughout human history seeking a renewed future in the land they love and call home.

In that light, it is not an insignificant part of the story that is told following the birth of Jesus and the arrival of the magi. In too many parts of the world, the vulnerability of children to the harshest realities of abusive power and violence is a common threat. When you look at the conditions of those today who live in Bethlehem—Palestinians who are subject to the dominant power and occupation of Israel—the story of Jesus' birth is revisited with terrible irony, i.e., the story of Israel's children reflected in the children of Palestine. The Nativity is not a sentimental story with benign intent—it speaks directly to the heart of human sinfulness and to that which seeks to destroy what is innocent and good. The terror of the nights is still present today in Bethlehem, in Gaza, in Aleppo, in Mosul, in many places destroyed by war and tyrants, and in the lives of the powerless across the landscape of this world. Jesus' story is most meaningful for them and for us, when we grasp that this is precisely where Christ is born today. Jesus' love and Spirit are found right where we would imagine him

least—with the children like Bana who, surrounded by violence, do not really know if they will survive another day.

Last week I received correspondence from Hanna Massad, a Palestinian Baptist minister who is involved with Syrian refugees in Amman, Jordan, as well as an ongoing ministry to the people of Gaza, where he formerly served as the pastor of Gaza Baptist Church. In his limited English, he wrote about the meaning of Jesus' refugee status and the people he now helps deliver from fear:

One of the families expressed, he said: “we are very thankful and grateful for what you did. This is the first time someone share with us that it's a blessing when you give, and it is important and better it is to give than receive, this touched me very much, thank you for sharing that with us.”

The second thing that we shared is how Jesus and his family fled to Egypt running away from the unjust king, just like them, they fled out Syria, running away from death.

They were shocked and encouraged to know that Jesus was a refugee and for that he understands the way each one of them feels, he went through what they went through, too.

They been touched by this story and it gave them the condolence and strength to face the difficulties which they face.

It was a blessed meeting, it was a great chance to talk with them about Jesus and what he teaches us in our life; like love and giving and other values he expressed by living it here on earth because he was humble and he has been a refugee and the Lord of all Lords in the same time.

We found the happiness raised up on their faces by having a peaceful smile; Jesus can turn the grief and tiredness inside them to happiness and hope.

We finished the meeting with prayers; we thanked Jesus for having them with us and for bringing them safe to Jordan. We thanked him for the ability to bless them.

God's plan is much better than our plan, he is always with us and he will make our life much different, we just need to trust Him all the way. Amen.

This is the power of the Christmas story—the part we often forget or simply pass over. It has a way of being relevant to those who need deliverance from a world that cares little for them, that would slaughter innocents rather than yield any of their privilege and power. These are the ones Jesus came to save. These are the ones who look for hope in us.

Matthew's story comes to us as part of what it means to have Christ born among us. It isn't just about mangers and magi; it is mostly about bringing hope into a threatening world and delivering people from their pain. It is about giving of ourselves so that others may be made well. It is about not resigning our spirits to the stubborn brokenness and despair based in fear.

Seven-year-old Bana Alabed, in her innocence now another of the world's refugees, reminds us of those with little hope. She deserves as much a chance at life as do any of us. She is as much our child as she is her mother's because, ultimately, she belongs to God, as do we. Hanna Massad understands that, as do many others. These are not our enemies, they are our children—God's children. They are the ones who will help us live into the realm of God, as Isaiah proclaimed and Jesus embodied.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
And the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
The calf and the lion and the fatling together,
And a little child shall lead them.

These are our children: Jesus and Bana, Malala and Neha, Mattie and Samantha, Ruby, Nkosi, and Iqbal, and so many others whose stories are remarkable, including the children in our midst and the ones inside our own hearts. These are the innocent ones who believe that such a peaceable world exists when we care and give generously to one another. They are the ones who understand so wisely that this is what life is about—that is why we

live. These are the children who can deliver us from our sinfulness and selfishness—they are the ones who will lead us to that hopeful and healing place.

As we remember them and turn our lives toward them, we will surely be blessed when we embrace what they embody and live into the peaceful realm of God of which they dream.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
1 January 2017