No Room At The Inn

*Linda Hartke, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services*

This year, the Christmas story has been retold early and with an unexpected ending in Texas.

As the four year old war in Syria continues to destroy lives, homes and livelihoods, more than half the population of this once-thriving nation have been forced from their homes. Those at the greatest risk, who have lost everything, and now are under threat by ISIS, flee for their lives and become refugees when they cross an international border seeking protection and register with the United Nations.

This has been the story of one family I will call the Al-Hariri—a mother and father who lived peacefully with their three small daughters. But threats, torture and death stalked them until they had no choice. They made a perilous journey and experienced indescribable violence. The girls don’t want to talk about it. They made their way to Jordan and became refugees. Their identity was reduced to ID numbers and they struggled to survive—the allowance for food, medical care and housing for refugees in Jordan is about $7 per person per month. While they waited, still hoping to go home, they grew more desperate. They were blessed with the birth of their fourth child, a girl, born a refugee without a homeland.

Then they made a courageous and heart-breaking decision. They were not going to be safe from ISIS or civil war if they went back to Syria, and they could no longer survive in Jordan, so they would apply to be resettled in a new country and start to rebuild their life. But that was only the beginning. It was nearly two years of waiting, interviews, producing documents, multiple security screenings, health screenings, more interviews, and more security screenings before they learned they had been accepted to come to the United States of America under the U.S. refugee program.

Again, they waited for months. Recently they learned that they would be resettled in Texas—a place and people they didn’t know. They have been attending a cultural orientation class, and learned that there are Americans in a local community preparing for their arrival, ready to welcome them and walk with them in their journey of starting life over again in a safe place. They are so extraordinarily grateful to America and Texas for offering them a new home.
But the story hasn’t gone quite as planned. As the Al-Hariri have been preparing their meager belongings for the first plane ride of their lives, Governor Abbott of Texas said, “Not in my state.” He signaled he would refuse to allow this mom and dad and four little girls to have a chance, a place of safety, and a new start in the great state of Texas.

As we celebrate our own Advent journey, I have to believe that people of faith, and certainly many people in Texas, have a different understanding of Christian hospitality and God’s call to love our neighbor. I like to believe that we would not slam the door and join the Governor’s ill-informed claim that "There is no room at the inn," for a desperate Syrian refugee family. And I hope and pray that you will join Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services (lirs.org/syria) in standing for welcome in Texas and every state.

Across the centuries, the words of Matthew 25:35 still speak powerfully to this moment: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

And how will the journey end for the Al-Hariri family? They were strangers, but now they are our neighbors—a blessing to their new community in Texas where they have been embraced by Lutherans.

The Christmas story of Joseph, Mary and Jesus; of angels, shepherds and wise men; and of a murderous ruler seeking the refugee child born in Bethlehem reminds us that we are a people of faith, hope and love - and the greatest of these is love.

God of the sojourner, we pray for the safety and well-being of all refugees, especially the newly arrived Syrian family we have welcomed to Texas as they begin to rebuild their lives in a new land. They were strangers once, but are now our neighbors. And we pray for our ministries with refugees.

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services and Refugee Services of Texas.

To find out more about how you can help, please visit:
- Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services: lirs.org/Syria
- Refugee Services of Texas: rstx.org