

# Nativity and immigration

## New lessons from the story of Mary and Joseph

*Editor's note: Mr. Jordan delivered this speech on the east steps of the Williamson County Courthouse on Sunday, December 7, as part of a vigil for detainees at the T. Don Hutto immigrant lock-up in Taylor.*

By MILTON JORDAN

Note, if you will, the decorations of red on that green Christmas tree. You can see as well the shining lights strung around our town square. We are in the midst of celebrating the Christmas season. It is a season that reminds us of an ancient story, the story of a young family and their newborn child.

You remember this story of Mary and Joseph, travelers from Galilee who end up in Bethlehem of Judea on the night their child is born. We remember also that, after a short time, Joseph realizes he must take action on behalf of his family. Matthew tells us this part of the story, when Joseph is warned in a dream to flee to Egypt. For the sake of his family Joseph becomes an immigrant, seeking refuge for himself and for Mary and Jesus. In this story most of the actions that Joseph and Mary take are legally questionable.

If we imagine the details of Matthew's story of this

young family, Joseph may have used the gold from the wise travelers to pay Judean and Egyptian officials. He may have hired a guide — a coyote — to lead them through the wilderness since the easier coast road may have been too dangerous. Joseph and Mary may have sold myrrh and frankincense to support themselves on their journey. Certainly they had to find others, on both sides of the border, to offer them shelter and even sanctuary.

At the end of some months or years (we can only imagine how long) Joseph decides to leave Egypt. Still dreaming, he realizes it is not safe to return to Judea. Once again this young family takes a dangerous journey. To avoid Herod's son, Archelaus, they must cross two borders and do it while no official is watching. Again we imagine the support of sympathetic citizens who provide food, shelter and sanctuary.

In the events of this Christmas story we see clear parallels to our own situation. Ask yourself, how do we support immigrant families who find themselves faced with such difficult choices? How should we respond to the presence of families and children, much like Joseph's young wife and child, in our midst? This is a

moral issue, an issue of great importance for faith-based communities.

Let me mention two principles that might guide our community. First we must affirm the worth, dignity and inherent civil and legal rights of every person regardless of their nationality or legal status. Secondly we should build bridges with immigrants in our local community, to learn from them, to celebrate their presence among us and to recognize the contributions that these immigrants bring to all areas of our community life.

The practice of incarcerating families and children with little regard for their civil and legal rights is destructive, not only for those families and their children, but for our community as a whole. We must discourage the continued use of such detention as a way of responding to immigrant families and children in our midst. We must encourage policies and practices that recognize the difficult choices many of these folks have faced and respond to their presence in more constructive ways for their sake and for our own.