

**You Shall Find Him Wrapped in a
Cleveland Browns Sweatshirt**
Adapted from a column by Pete Hamill, Newsday Inc. 1994
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
30 December 2007
Text: Matthew 2:13-15

No sooner does Jesus get born than he gets slapped with a bounty on his head. How quickly is the silent, holy night disrupted by the ruling powers who quickly mount a campaign to get rid of this threat. We are not allowed to linger at the manger, holding our candles aloft, blinking back tears of joy and belief that peace, at last, may come to earth. We cannot worship on Christmas Eve forever, because Jesus doesn't stay there very long. He and his family had to flee, uprooted from their ancestral city, in fear for their very lives. They become refugees, seeking safety in a strange place, far from home.

Today there are 15 million refugees world-wide, many, like Jesus and his parents, forced to leave their homes because of threats of violence, economic oppression, and political upheaval. Immigration has become a potent political issue throughout the nation, including here in our hometown—once so renowned for its hospitable welcome of newcomers it was called “the City of Hope.” Pulitzer-prize winning author and syndicated columnist Pete Hamill has written an imaginative story about one such family, and I offer it today as another way of thinking about the meaning of Jesus' birth: who it comforted, and who it challenged.

The city was up ahead in the darkness now, but Maria Lourdes could not see it through the swirling snow. There was a sense of arrival as passengers stirred, lifting cases from the overhead racks. She heard a murmur of voices after hours of dozing silence. She did not know the language, but she heard the words, “New York.” Women yawned; men stretched. There were many cars now. And as the bus made a long, wide turn and edged into a bright tunnel. Maria Lourdes could feel her heart racing.

Her own zippered bag was at her feet, containing all that she owned. A blue dress that no longer fit over her swollen belly. The red shoes she had worn to the dance in Los Angeles where she met Jose Villasenor. Some underwear and a toothbrush and sweatshirt bearing the name of the Cleveland Browns. Those things, and \$24 and the baby within her were all that she carried into this strange, new city.

For one long day, while the bus moved through the countryside, the baby had reminded her of its presence. The baby pushed. The baby kicked. She gazed at distant houses behind fences of trees bright with many-colored lights, and the baby told her, I'm coming, I want to get out, I want to breathe and stretch and cry. And Maria Lourdes whispered to her baby: Wait. Wait one more day, just wait, and your father will be there as he promised, your father will hold you and laugh and cry. Just wait.

The baby had waited. And now Maria Lourdes was in a tunnel and its walls were closing upon her and she too wanted to breathe and stretch and cry. Wait, she whispered, this time to herself. Wait. Jose Villasenor is in the bus station. He is at the place marked "Information." His black hair is combed straight back. His sad, brown eyes are searching for you. Wait.

The bus came up into the city and Maria Lourdes took a deep breath and gazed out the window. The snow was falling hard. She had seen snow on the peaks of volcanoes. She had seen snow in movies and while watching television in her aunt's house in Puebla. But there was no snow in Los Angeles and there had been no snow during the long, grinding journey across the country. Now she was in New York and there was the snow, melting on the window of the bus, gathering on the roofs of parked cars, thickening on the racks of unsold Christmas trees. "Nieves," she whispered to the baby. "If you are a girl, I'll call you Nieves. The snows. You will be pure as this snow. God will protect you, my Nieves; God, and Jose Villasenor.

And then the bus was in the station and some of the passengers clapped their hands and all of them were on their feet. Maria Lourdes rose, her bag in her hand, her heart pounding. She had combed her hair out, straight and flat, to look more like the gringa women. Her blue coat was thin, but it was a nice coat. If she was careful, she could look like a gringa. She had been coached by her

friend Lydia in Los Angeles. Just walk quickly, like you know where you're going, Lydia said, and don't look nervous.

She walked into a bright area with shops and newsstands and ticket counters. Christmas music played from speakers. But there was no information counter and no Jose Villasenor. Over at the side, two policemen were chatting and smiling. Calm yourself, Maria Lourdes thought; and the baby kicked. Without looking at the policemen, she followed other passengers onto an escalator and arrived in another vast, high-ceilinged room. There were many policemen now, walking alone or standing in pairs, and policemen outside on the street. And there was an information counter, too. But there was no Jose Villasenor.

Her breath came in short gasps now. She gazed around the vast terminal, hoping that Jose would suddenly arrive, breathless and apologetic. Perhaps he had used another stairway. She heard words on a loudspeaker, saw a young woman rush into the arms of a young man, saw others lugging suitcases and bags of Christmas gifts in bright wrapping paper. But no Jose.

A mustached policeman stood near a row of telephones along a wall. Maria Lourdes fumbled in her pocket and found the piece of paper with the telephone number: 718 and then seven more numbers. It was a house in a barrio called Brooklyn, Jose had told her. A very big barrio. Three other Mexicans lived there too. Jose was the only carpenter. But there was one room with a door, and they could live there until they found a larger place. That's what he'd told her, just a week ago. She looked at the number he'd given her, dropped 25-cents in the slot and dialed. A man answered. "Is Jose there?" she asked in Spanish. "Who?" "Jose Villasenor," she said. "You got the wrong number, lady," the voice said. "This is a candy store." He hung up. She didn't understand the words, but she understood the abrupt silence. The baby kicked, then kicked again, hard. She turned away, and saw that the station was not so crowded now. Then she saw two police officers staring at her. She hurried to the doors and went through them to the street.

To her right there were bright lights and movie marquees, all blurry through the falling snow. She turned left walking toward the darkness. The snow was coming at an angle now, driven by the wind, and she realized that this was the first time snow had touched

her face and her hair. The snow filled her eyes. She had to brush it away to see, and still it kept coming. She could the wind howling like some huge wolf.

Cars moved slowly. The, wiping the snow from her eyes, shuddering in the cold, she saw a police car. She ducked into a doorway as it went by and stepped on a man sleeping in a cardboard box. He shouted something in hard, short words, like bricks. She ran then, slipping in the snow, righting herself against a car. The pain came again: very sharply. Then she was moving down other streets, looking for a church that was open, or a hotel, or somewhere to get in out of the cold.

The whole world seemed closed and very quiet. She saw a taxi but was afraid to take it to a hospital. She thought: They'll arrest me, they'll send me and the baby back to Puebla, and my father will throw me out again. The pain was sudden now, again, again. She saw a neon sign for a hotel. But the glass door was locked. A black man behind a desk shook his head no. She turned away, feeling forlorn and helpless, and trying to pray. She did not see the man rise and approach the door.

Maria Lourdes was along now in the empty snow-muffled streets, and the pain was coming every few minutes. She said out loud: I'm about to have this baby! Now! But there was nobody to hear her. She hugged the side of a brick wall, trying doors, looking for some refuge from the wind and snow. And then found a door that was open. A wide, heavy wooden door. She shoved and hauled and moved it a foot. She stepped inside and suddenly inhaled the sweet warm odor of her country childhood: horses, straw, feed, and dung. A dim light dangled from the ceiling. She saw a small Christmas tree on a shelf and carriages with huge wheels, and she heard horses moving and shuddering. The pain attacked. She dropped her bag and fell into the damp straw. Then, bleary with pain, the light bulb circling on the ceiling, the walls moving, the horses shifting, she saw the policemen coming in the door. Two of them. And others: the black man from the hotel. And, and....was that Jose Villasenor behind them? With his carpenter's bag over his shoulder? She was crying now, pleading with the policemen not to arrest her, and one of them said in Spanish. "Hey, lady, we're not here to arrest you. We're here to help you. Just lie back down. . . ." And then the baby pushed for air and room and the

policemen helped and the pain was beyond anything she had ever felt and she screamed and screamed.

Until it was over. She saw the sweaty faces of the policemen. She saw the black man from the hotel, his eyes watery. She saw Jose, heard him babbling about the train being delayed by the snow and how he'd found an apartment for them. And the policemen were hugging each other and the black man was laughing and then someone handed her the baby. A boy. Wrapped in a Cleveland Browns sweat shirt. Stretching, perfect, wailing. "Will you arrest me now?" she murmured to the Spanish-speaking policeman. "Arrest you?" he said. "Lady, welcome to America."

And though the policemen teased about calling the baby Jesus, Maria Lourdes decided to name him America. She held him fiercely to her breast while the snow fell softly on the silent Christmas city. [Pete Hamill, Newsday Inc. Los Angeles Times Syndication, 1994, slightly adapted]

Across the millennia, into our own time and place, echoes the words of the adult Jesus: *I was a stranger and you welcomed me. . . when you do it to the least of these who are members of my family, you do it to me. Amen.*

Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor