

Refugee and Migrant Sunday Sample Sermon – March 12th

Genesis 12:1-4 Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”^[a]

⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

John 3:16 God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul” goes the words of the old hymn. And it is wondrous, the love of God made visible in Jesus. Many of us are here today, sitting in church, because we have been touched by that love, moved by the way that love comes to us and surrounds us even when we least deserve or expect it. God holds nothing back, gives it all, to save us. How amazing.

There are two aspects of the love of God in Christ that are particularly wondrous to me. First, it comes to us all, any of us who will receive it. The human tendency is always to draw boundaries. We are on the inside, of course! Others are on the outside, undeserving of the good gifts that we insiders own. That is not God’s tendency, however. God embraces us all, pours out his life for us all, regardless of whether we are rich or poor, good or bad, native-born or foreign-born. We are all in God’s arms together. When I was a child, when I fought with my sister, my big warm grandmother would sometimes wrap us up in her big embrace and hold on to us both to stop us from fighting. We would struggle at first but laughing and crying, sooner or later, we would relax in her arms and the fight would be over. God’s love compels us to join in a common love.

The other aspect of the love of God that we see in the Genesis scripture is that God doesn’t just give to us, he gives through us. We are made in God’s image and deep inside we all want to be givers. We don’t just want to receive; we want to make a positive difference in the world! We don’t just want to be blessed; we want to bless. Abraham is blessed with the capacity and opportunity to be a blessing. In fact, in this scripture lesson, Abraham is sent out from his native land to migrate to another land, and in the process, he is actually going to bless people who are not his own, communities that he has never seen and can’t yet imagine.

This is Refugee and Migrant Sunday, a day in which many in our church are remembering the strangers in our midst and God’s command to love the stranger. This is a hard command for many of us at this historical moment. Our government and many Americans are focusing on the potentially threatening and negative aspects of strangers. We are willing to spend millions to fortify and extend the border wall, to stop refugees from arriving from predominantly Muslim countries, to deport as many immigrants who do not have their full legal status as possible. In this rush to protect ourselves, it is easy to lose sight of the actual people who are migrants and refugees – people who are loved by our

God, people who may be bringing blessings. We may not know the details of the new executive orders – that they ban the recently approved father of a Iraqi translator for the US forces who has received multiple death threats, that they ban children whose lives are in danger. We may not know that the deportation priorities not only include criminals but also people who the immigration enforcement officer thinks may have committed a chargeable offense even if there has been no accusation or conviction and the person has citizen family members. We may not know that children and youth fleeing violence in Central America have become a priority for deportation if they don't have family members in this country – even if there is solid evidence that they will be killed if they are sent back. These actions have happened so quickly that most of us have not read the fine print. We don't know how the real people, real migrants and refugees are being affected.

Let's take a minute to look more closely at refugees and migrants today. Our government defines refugees as people outside of their country who are unable or unwilling to return home because they fear serious harm. To be granted asylum, you have to demonstrate a "well-founded fear of persecution" in your home country. There are roughly 50 million refugees in the world; the majority are mothers and their children. The largest single source of refugees at this moment is Syria with 4 million of its residents desperately seeking a safe place to stay. Over 220,000 Syrians have been killed, including 110,000 civilians.

The next most dangerous area in the world is the Northern Triangle of Central America (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador) where there is a murder an hour as a result of increasingly powerful international mafia who are controlling large territories. These criminal organizations make their money from the extortion of small businesses (over \$650 million dollars a year), drug trafficking, guns trafficking and human trafficking. They forcibly conscript teenage boys and force girls to become sex slaves on the threat of murdering family members. Approximately 80,000 children, youth and their mothers arrived in the United States over the past two years seeking asylum. The Wilbur Wilburforce Anti-trafficking legislation of 2008 mandates that unaccompanied migrant children and youth from these countries receive a full asylum assessment. However, this requires legal assistance. When these children and youth are able to obtain lawyers, over 77% are granted refugee status. However, our government does not automatically grant lawyers to asylum seekers. When they don't have access to a lawyer, only 7% of them are recognized as refugees. In addition to prioritizing the deportation of children without sponsors, the administration is planning to cut off grant funds that could provide legal assistance and expand expedited deportation – deportation by the border patrol without a hearing.

It can be overwhelming to even think about all these suffering people; after all, we have enough suffering in our country alone, right? The natural impulse in a broken and fallen world is to "circle the wagons", to protect ourselves and those we love and to only share with them. We are understandably concerned about our security when we consider opening our arms to those who come from violent places. Even though statistically immigrants commit fewer crimes than native-born residents, it is a natural impulse to be cautious. However, there are noble moments when we go beyond those impulses. After World War II, in the midst of the worldwide horror caused by the Holocaust and a truly enormous number of refugees, almost all of the countries in the world signed the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations which included the "right to seek asylum from

persecution". This other impulse, the impulse to hospitality, is supported by over 92 passages in the Old and New Testament. The great Christian author Henri Nouwen spoke of the Christian life as a journey from hostility to hospitality. The scriptures which call us to hospitality often remind us that it is also in our benefit to do so; Abraham was not the only migrant bringing blessings. Hebrews 13:2 reminds us that when we welcome strangers that we may be welcoming angels in disguise. The word for angel in Koine Greek refers to more than just celestial beings. Angels are any messenger of God sent to bring a blessing. Any stranger could be an angel. Our impulse is to see the other as a threat – and that can always be true! -- but there are also intimate enemies – and the other can be an angel, bringing a blessing.

The Lutheran church has a long proud history of welcoming migrants and refugees. Our theology of grace calls us to share the grace that we have received from God with others in need of mercy and rescue. We have many opportunities through our national organization Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service to help – from donations to advocacy. The AMMPARO program is a national ELCA initiative for Central American refugees. We also have local opportunities in our Synod. The Guardian Angels is a project of the Synod Justice and Global Missions teams. The Angels accompany children and youth from Central America in court, observing the process to ensure that their rights are respected, referring them to services and caring for them. Let me share a story. Sandra came to the United States from a very poor area in El Salvador to work and send the money home to her sister to care for her son Christian so that he could go to school. When Christian was 12 years old, the neighborhood where his school is located was taken over by the Marasalvatrucha. When his aunt tried to take him to school, she was told that he couldn't enter that area because he lived outside the territory. When she defied the order, she was stabbed in front of Christian. Traumatized, Christian fled to the United States to run to his mother and was picked up at the border by the Border Patrol; he was released into the custody of this mother while his immigration case was in process. However, he did not have a lawyer. The judge ordered his mother to find him a lawyer, but as a fast food worker she did not have the capacity to pay for a lawyer. At the next court date, the judge said that Christian would be deported if she did not find a lawyer for him. When Sandra and Christian were crying in the corridor outside the courtroom, a Guardian Angel volunteer tapped her on the shoulder and helped them to find a lawyer. Christian now has been granted political asylum and can stay in this country legally. He is studying hard in school so that he too can be a lawyer when he grows up, and his faith is strong. Sandra says that they now believe in Guardian Angels. There are also a variety of other ways to help, defend and support refugees and migrants at this historic moment. If you would like to be trained to volunteer as a Guardian Angel or help in some other way, please contact Pastor Alexia Salvatierra at alexia@alexiasalvatierra.com. There are also

Whether you are moved to direct support or not, please do keep refugees and migrants in your prayers. This is a dark moment around the world for those feeling violence; The love of Christ coming through you can make all the difference for someone else.

Sample Temple Talk for Refugee and Immigrant Sunday March 12th

Good Morning! Today is Refugee and Immigrant Sunday and I want to tell you a few things you may not know.

There is a lot of talk going on about refugees and immigrants, mostly about building walls and sending them back. We've heard the stories about children coming from Central America on their own and with their parents, primarily mothers, and Syrians escaping the civil war in their own country.

It's easy to call these people "illegal" or "radicals" or "Jihadists", but the reality is most of these people are escaping unspeakable violence. There have never been as many displaced people as there are now. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 1 out of every 122 human beings on earth is either a refugee, internally displaced, or seeking asylum.

Why are so many children and families coming from Central America and Syria? Many Americans believe it is because of economic issues, but it is not. It is Life and Death. Central Americans are coming here to escape gang threats, human trafficking and drug cartels. One story that has come from the Lutheran Church in El Salvador tells of a congregant who refused to pay the gangs a bribe to keep her store safe. They killed her nephew in response. Honduras is the murder capital of the world and El Salvador and Guatemala are numbers 4 and 5. The U.S. is not settling many Syrian Refugees at this time, but they are fleeing the threat from their own government and from ISIS. Their stories are heartbreaking. Who can forget the picture of the little boy who drowned in the Mediterranean?

Did you know the Lutheran Church of El Salvador is a companion synod to our own? Their bishop has asked that our synod welcome migrants from their church and minister to them and 22 congregations have agreed to be Welcoming Congregations. But, the synod justice team has gone further. Many of these children do not have legal representation and must go to immigration court on their own. The Justice Team has started "Guardian Angels" who accompany these minors to court. They do not do any legal work, but are there to show support for the children.

Jesus said, "For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me. Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you? Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'"

What can we do to help these people? First of all we can pray. We can educate ourselves by studying the LIRS website, which also offers several Bible Study resources as well as advocacy opportunities (lirs.org.) We can donate to Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service or to the Synod Justice Team or Global Missions Team for the Guardian Angels or for the Lutheran Church of El Salvador.. We can volunteer to be a Guardian Angel. Next Summer the Global Missions Team is sponsoring a trip to El Salvador, so you can see for yourself what is going on there. If you would like more information about the refugee and migrant situation, the impact of current policies, and how you can help, please contact Rev. Alexia Salvatierra at alexia@alexiasalvatierra.com