

A Biblical Perspective on Immigration Issues – from a Workshop led by Marilyn Fox

Based on the text: “Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church and the Bible”

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On April 21, 1938 while addressing a gathering of the Daughters of the American Revolution, Franklin Roosevelt said “We are descended from immigrants and revolutionaries.” Can I have a show of hands here: How many are descendents of immigrants? Revolutionaries? Both?? Of course, he omitted Native Americans, who were here all along, and those who were brought here against their will as enslaved people. (For presenter, you might ask:- “Raise you hands if this applies to your ancestors: Native Americans? Slaves?”

Today, hundreds of thousands of people leave their place of birth each year. Europe, long a sender of immigrants, has become the receiver of unprecedented numbers of people from other countries. Today, the largest percentage of migrants world wide come from Africa. Many risk their lives crossing borders without proper papers or setting forth in flimsy boats in the hopes of finding a better life. Others simply arrive as tourists and never leave. This migration of masses of people presents a huge moral and societal challenge for the receiving countries. Citizens of the host countries fear that these newcomers will take jobs away from them, or that their culture and language will be swallowed up by the preponderance of foreigners. They wonder how their social safety net can stand the strain of so many needy arrivals? Outrage rises against those who are illegals, who have broken the law in coming here. Many fear that these strangers will pose a threat to their national security and they should be deported as soon as they are apprehended. But how should we as Christians respond to the often strident discourse around us. What, if anything, does the Bible have to say about immigration and the treatment of foreigners in general??? Can any human being truly be “illegal”?

On the first page of the Bible, the concept of the dignity and worth of all human beings is established. In Gen 1: 26 and 27 we read: “Then God said, “And now we will make human beings; they will be like us and resemble us.” As we learn here, great prominence is given to human beings, who not only will be made in the image of God, but who “will have power over the fish, the birds, and all animals, domestic and wild, large and small. As Daniel Carroll writes, “The creation of all persons in the image of God must be the most basic conviction for Christians as they approach the challenges of immigration today. Immigrants are not abstract concepts but human beings and as such they are made in God’s image”. As children of God, they are worthy of our respect and should be treated as such at all times.

As we study the scriptures, we learn that the Bible is a continual history of people who for one reason or another, have embarked on a journey- who have become sojourners in other lands. Some chose to travel to escape famine, or drought. Some fled to save their lives. Others, like Daniel and Esther, were forceably deported to far away places like Babylon and Persia. Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt by his jealous siblings. These displaced Israelites had to make their home in a land where the worship of Yahweh was not known nor acknowledged. They faced the challenge of living a righteous life in a pagan society. When put to the test, they risked death to follow the teachings of their faith. Psalm 137, we are privy to the feelings of the Israelite captives in Babylon as the Psalmist records them. He writes: “By the waters of Babylon we sat down; there we wept when we remembered Zion. Those who captured us told us to sing: they told us to entertain them: “Sing us a song about Zion” But with sorrow they replied: ‘How can we sing a song to the Lord in a foreign land.” Reflecting the feelings of the captives in Babylon, immigrants who arrived in the US historically established sanctuaries in which they could worship God in their own languages, and where they could feel “at home”. Being part of a religious community gave them a sense of family and helped them to overcome the feelings of loneliness, and intense homesickness that are part of the immigrant experience. Some of those Christians attend churches like these in our Presbytery.

The Old Testament patriarchs led a nomadic life. They lived in tents and tended their livestock. Abram and his extended family leave Ur of the Chaldeans at God’s command and move to Canaan (Gen 12). This relocation was far from permanent. They would continue their migrations often due to a lack of adequate rainfall. In Gen.

12, we read “But there was a famine in Canaan, and it was so bad that Abram went farther south to Egypt, to live there for a while.” In Chapter 13 Abram goes north out of Egypt to the southern part of Canaan with his wife and all his cattle and possessions. In numerous places in Genesis, the patriarchs are called “sojourners” or they are said to sojourn in an area for a time. (Gen 17:8 And I will give to you and to your descendants after you the land of your sojourners, all the land of Canaan). The word Sojourner “Ger” is translated as foreigner in the good news Bible. In other places, the term is “resident alien”. The only piece of land Abraham is said to have owned was the cave of Machpelah, which he bought from Ephron the Hitite in order to have a plot in which to bury his wife Sarah.

Egypt was a common refuge in Biblical times. In his book, *Israel in Egypt*, James Hoffmeier writes “Because of the massive Nile river and the rich soil in the delta along its banks, Egypt was considered the breadbasket of the region. Jacob sends his sons twice to Egypt to buy food as shortages worsen and there is no longer pasture land for the cattle to graze. Apparently, Egyptians were accustomed to receiving immigrants, whether for short-term or long-term stays, although reaction to them varied. A series of defense systems were established to keep some out, but small bands continually made their way to Egypt. Eventually Jacob and his sons and their families move to Egypt and there, with Joseph’s help, they are able to escape starvation.

The narrative in Genesis concerning Joseph is truly an immigrant success story. He achieved a very powerful position in Egyptian Society. He was held in great esteem and was appointed to be the king’s highest official – the ruler of all of Egypt. He was so assimilated into Egyptian society that he was unrecognizable to his brothers. He looked, dressed and spoke like an Egyptian. But he set an example for all immigrants and for the rest of us as well when he forgave those who had mistreated him so cruelly. He tells them “God sent me ahead of you to save people’s lives and to rescue you in this amazing way and to make sure that you and your descendants survive. So it was not really you who sent me here, but God.” When Pharaoh was introduced to Joseph’s family, he looked with favor on them, and tells Joseph “Settle your father and your brothers in the best of the land; let them dwell in the land of Goshen; and if you know any able men among them, put them in charge of my cattle.” (Genesis 46:6) As we see here, the immigrant Hebrews were welcomed warmly into the foreign culture and were provided with good land, employment, and food. (As with modern day immigrants, it is always good to have relatives pave the way for you! And if they are well placed in the society, all the better!) As Deut. 26 states as the years passed “there they (the Israelites) became a great nation, mighty and populous.”

James Hoffmeier writes “The Old Testament not only provides accounts of the plight of those taken to other countries and of those who had been forced to flee; it also describes the life of their descendants in those far away lands.” He describes the societal shift in attitudes towards the Israelites four hundred years after Joseph’s death. “Even as they benefited from the Israelites toil, Pharaoh and the Egyptians feared the surprising increase in their numbers. They were willing to take advantage of the cheap labor of this foreign people as long as they were “invisible”.

Once the population of Israelites increased and their presence no longer went unnoticed, the Egyptians in the dominant culture began to worry. They took measures to control this growth, to the point of decreeing state sponsored infanticide.” They forced the Israelites to work under cruel overlords. The Israelites felt oppressed and afflicted with hard bondage. But there never was a question of curtailing their labor or of alleviating their work. “The response to complaints and insubordination by these laborers was to prescribe higher and more difficult quotas. The empire needed these foreigners to complete their construction projects and to work the fields to feed the populace.” But it an Egyptian exile named Moses who would lead them out of Egypt and set them off on the arduous journey back to the promised land of Canaan once more. Moses had been prepared by God for this role since he was raised in Pharaoh’s court and was fluent in Egyptian. It was commanded by God that the Israelites never forget the story their escape from Egypt. It was to be repeated by the head of the household each year when presenting the first fruits of the harvest to the Lord in the temple and must be retold during the Passover celebration, which includes the phrase “Each person is to regard themselves as personally having gone forth out of Egypt.” Jews were to remember how they were oppressed in Egypt when they

encounter people who are outsiders. They were to follow the mandate in Ex. 22:21 reads “ You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

The Bible teaches that God is sovereignly involved in the movements of all peoples, and is, ultimately, involved in all of human history. (Amos 9:7) For many, their journeys were providential in nature. The Old Testament has many examples of strangers and foreigners who were used by God for the good of all. Ruth, the Moabite, a famous sojourner in Canaan, would become the mother of Obed, the father of Jesse, and an ancestor of Jesus.

Hospitality in the Ancient World:

Travel in Old Testament times could be treacherous. There were potential dangers to be faced on the road, as was the problem of finding sufficient food and drink and lodging in an arid climate. The cultures of the ancient Near East responded to these needs with shared conventions of hospitality toward the stranger. In the Old Testament, hospitality to the stranger is a virtue. Job cites his care of the traveler as testimony to his integrity. In (Job 31:32) Job says “all those who work for me know that I have always welcomed strangers. I invited travelers into my home and never let them sleep in the streets.”

There were protocols and expectations for the host to be openhanded and for visitors not to abuse their welcome. It was assumed, too, that this act of kindness would be reciprocated, if and when the host were to journey to the guest’s land.

Israel was not an exception to this widespread cultural ethic. A well known example of hospitality in ancient Israel is described in detail in Genesis 18:

“The Lord appeared to Abraham at the sacred trees of Mamre. As Abraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent during the hottest part of the day, he looked up and saw three men standing there. As soon as he saw them, he ran out to meet them. Bowing down with his face touching the ground, he said, ‘Sirs, please do not pass by my home without stopping; I am here to serve you. Let me bring some water for you to wash your feet; you can rest here beneath this tree. I will also bring a bit of food, it will give you strength to continue your journey. You have honored me by coming to my home, so let me serve you.’ They replied, ‘Thank you, we accept.’ Abraham hurried into the tent and said to Sarah, ‘Quick, take a sack of your best flour, and bake some bread.’ Then he ran to the herd and picked out a calf that was tender and fat, and gave it to a servant, who hurried to get it ready. He took some cream, some milk, and the meat, and set the food before the men. There under the tree he served them himself, and they ate.” The writer of the letter to the Hebrews must have remembered this account of hospitality when he advises (13:2) “Remember to welcome strangers in your homes. There were some who did that and welcomed angels without knowing it.”

In his book *“Old Testament Ethics for the People of God”*, Christopher Wright states that Israel’s treatment of the sojourner was part of the larger fabric of its ethical life. Israel had a long history of having other peoples dwelling in their midst”. Prophets like Ezekiel and Jeremiah thundered against Israelites who did not accept the responsibility for these people. Without land and kin, many sojourners would be dependent on the Israelites for work, provision and protection. In Jeremiah 22:3 we read “Do not mistreat or oppress aliens, widows or orphans”. Lev. 19:34 states “the alien living among you must be treated as one of your native born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.” They were to be charitable to foreigners because that is what it meant to be the people of God. Israel was to behave in a manner that reflected their love of God and God’s love for all humanity.

The responsibility to take care of the sojourner in Israel was carried out at many levels, through families, religious centers and other local initiatives. Individual families were instructed to permit aliens to rest on the Sabbath, and to include them in celebrations. The community was commanded to let foreigners participate in the gleaning laws, (the well known immigrant Ruth benefited from those laws). In the workplace, employers were told to provide wages for workers. In the temples, tithes were collected for aid to the poor. Fairness in legal matters was expected. Sojourners could seek legal aid at the city gate with elders presiding or at other legal gatherings. Everyone in one way or another was involved in the care of the sojourner. The prophets make it clear that God held everyone responsible for their wellbeing, from individuals to society as a whole.

In Leviticus and Deuteronomy, many laws were written to govern how foreigners should conduct themselves. The laws assume that there should be a willingness on the part of the sojourner toward adapting to the host culture. Assimilation is encouraged. Sojourners were required to learn the ways and the language of Israel and to respect its religious laws and sexual taboos. They were subject to the penalties of criminal laws, to local dietary restrictions, and were forbidden to worship other gods or blaspheme against the Lord. These laws indicated that Israel opened its most central and most precious sphere of its life to sojourners: its religion. This faith in Yahweh was crucial to Israel's identity as a people and a nation. Sojourners were permitted to participate in the Sabbath, the day of Atonement and the Passover celebration. They were obligated to be present at the periodic reading of the law and were expected to learn Hebrew so they could understand better the culture in which they lived. However, they were not permitted to worship in the sanctuary of the Temple. Ruth, the revered Moabite, was an exception.

As we study the New Testament, we learn that Jesus himself began life as a refugee. The joy of the nativity scene and the wonder of the visit of the magi are overshadowed by the senseless slaughter of innocent children. In Matt. 2:13-14, The Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph and said, "Herod will be looking for the child in order to kill him. So get up, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you to leave." It does not appear that the young couple had much time to gather up their belongings before setting out on such an arduous trip in the middle of the night. Scholars believe that they set out for Alexandria, Egypt which had a large Jewish population residing there at that time. There is no record of how long they were sojourners in Egypt, but in their desperate flight to safety, they join the ranks of refugees who throughout history have been forced to flee for their lives.

In Jesus ministry, the people of God are taught the true faith through an encounter with a person who is outside of and rejected by their culture. Jesus did not accept society's judgments concerning the worth of people who lived at the lowest rung of their social ladder – the tax collectors, foreigners/strangers (Xenos in Greek), the sick, the poor and the sinners. This is particularly true in Jesus dealings with Samaritans.

In (Luke 10:25)When asked by a teacher of the law "Who is my neighbor", Jesus replies by telling him the story of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritans were loathed in Israel. They were considered to be enemies. Their faith was regarded as a perversion of the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. To have any contact with Samaritans would make a Jew ritually unclean. But in this parable, Jesus holds up the Samaritan as a role model of someone who truly knew how to love their neighbor. Unlike the Levite and the priest, he is the one who cares for wounded man who had been beaten by robbers, takes him to an inn, cares for the man there and then promises to pay anything that might be needed in his absence. When asked "which of the three do you think acted as a neighbor toward the man attacked by the robbers? The scribe responds correctly but refers to the merciful Samaritan simply as "the one". He cannot bring himself to utter the hated word. Jesus ends by telling the scribe to emulate that neighbor, the Samaritan, in order to fulfill the command to love your neighbor.

It is among the Samaritans that Jesus words were graciously received. It is to the Samaritan woman at the well that Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah. It is she who goes and tells others to come and hear Jesus, many of whom came to believe in Him. Their response to his teachings was so enthusiastic that they begged him to stay longer among them, which he did. In Luke 17:15-19, of the 10 men healed that day, it was the Samaritan leper who returned to thank Jesus. Jesus quickly asks this question "There were ten men who were healed, where are the other nine? "Why is it this foreigner is the only one who came back to give thanks to God?"

In Matt. 26 Jesus continues to emphasize the importance of reaching out to those without status. "Whoever makes himself great will be humbled and everyone who humbles himself will be made great". And who should be invited to lunch or to dinner? Only those who are our relatives? Only our rich neighbors - those who are in our comfort zone so to speak? No, he says "When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind; and you will be blessed ." In Matt 25:40, Jesus affirms his "oneness" with the stranger whom we

invite into our homes by saying: “When you have done it to the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me.”

Hosting strangers in one’s home was very important in the Early Christian Church. Paul, and other apostles and teachers were itinerant ministers who traveled throughout the Roman Empire preaching and teaching the Christian faith. As strangers and often persons in danger, their need for hospitality and shelter was crucial to their very survival. Since church meetings were held in residences, they had to be open to all people. Paul wrote that “If a man is eager to be a church leader, he must welcome strangers into his home. (ITim.3:2)

The epistles of Peter, which were addressed to Christians who were living in Asia Minor (Turkey). Peter refers to the recipients of these letters as “strangers” or “refugees” (parepidemos), and at other times he calls them “aliens” (paroikos). We do not know why they were migrated to that area – perhaps to escape persecution in Rome. But they were strangers in their places of residence, and many were non citizens without the rights and privileges of full citizens. As non citizens they endured the same social, political and economic limitations that the non-documented people among us face today. Here the terms foreigners/refugees/ aliens/ sojourners are used interchangeably to describe them. One thing they had in common was the threat they faced of persecution from the authorities for their faith in Christ. When they sat at table to celebrate communion, they were bound together in their oneness in Christ. What are we to surmise from this? Is it not that all human beings are sojourners on this earth. In many ways, this temporal place can never be our true home. We travel on a journey moving toward our final heavenly home with our Lord in heaven. In that ultimate destination, there will be no difference between gentile or Jew or Greek or Roman, male or female, foreigner or citizen. We will all be together as the children of God.

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www.pcusa.org/immigration

www.longislandwins.com

LI_Council_of_Churches@mail.vresp.com>

www.pcusa.org/oga/publications If you want to download information _ ie: Resolution

Calling for a Comprehensive Legalization Program for Immigrants Living and Working in the United States:

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