

A Migrant Caravan  
October 28, 2018  
Matthew 2.1-16  
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The story of scripture begins with poetry. We say this often because this poem is foundational for all of the other things we believe. The Genesis 1 poem is the lens through which we see all other scripture, and so it bears repeating over and over again. The hovering Spirit of God breathes a world into being, imagines a universe, speaks rivers and oceans into existence, and forms humankind in the very image of the one doing the creating. God calls them very good.

By Genesis 3, the first contract has fallen apart, and the man and woman must leave the Garden. They've reached too far for forbidden fruit in an attempt to bypass God in their story and consume wisdom rather than taking the slow route of earning it and growing in it. By Genesis 3, the first humans are migrating. And before they go, God stitches together some traveling clothes for their journey, providing for them even as their relationship is stretched to the point of breaking.

Noah builds an ark and takes refuge from the flood not knowing where or when that boat will land. Abram leaves for the land God will show him, but it wasn't as simple as packing up and heading to a new town. Abram's move took him to the land of Canaan with detours and journeys, including time in Egypt as a refugee from a famine. And even once his wife Sarah dies, Abraham must approach the Canaanites for a burial place, saying, "I am a foreigner and stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead."

Lot takes his family and flees Sodom. Jacob moves his family to Egypt to escape the famine and reunite with Joseph. Joseph brings his foreign brothers, his undocumented immigrant brothers, his criminal brothers who sold him into slavery and told his father he'd been killed, and guides them through an employment process with the Pharaoh so they might survive in a new land.

But a day of a new Pharaoh comes, one who does not remember Joseph, and these once-welcomed strangers become an enslaved people. Despite attempts to thwart the Israelites by killing their baby boys, Moses is born, saved, and raised by Pharaoh's daughter. When the time comes for Moses to demand the freedom of his people, long

oppressed and exploited by the Pharaoh, they are kicked out of Egypt so fast they had no time to make provisions and had to bake unleavened cakes of bread.

The laws of God are passed to the people through Moses, and he tells them, "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien; for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." Their oppression is written into their story as a mandated holy welcome for all. Even in the dailyness of work, "You shall not strip your vineyards bare...leave them for the poor and the alien." In all things, they are to be mindful of the oppressed, mindful of the neglected, mindful of the stranger in their midst.

The instructions continue throughout Leviticus, "When the alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."

A time comes when the Levites are refugees and need a safe place of welcome. The Lord instructs Moses to give cities of refuge to the Levites so that when the Israelites must flee into Canaan they may have cities of refuge given to them.

In Deuteronomy, the people of Israel are made aware that the land had come to them as a gift from God and they were to remember that they were once aliens. Why all of these rules of protection, welcome, and provision? Why God's law instructing the Israelites to have only one law for both citizen and resident alien? God makes clear to them, "For the Lord your God...loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Laws on money and trials are established to care for the stranger and assure justice for resident foreigners. *You shall not withhold the wages...you shall not deprive [them] of justice.* Deuteronomy continues with rules and laws and provisions—olives and grapes to be shared. The "you shall not" becomes "cursed be anyone" who deprives the alien of justice.

Immigrants were important in building the temple. David recognized his posture before God as that of "alien and transient." King Solomon took a census of immigrants and gave them jobs.

The Psalmist praises the God who remembers:

"He remembers his covenant forever,  
the promise he made, for a thousand generations,

When they were but few in number,  
few indeed, and strangers in it,  
they wandered from nation to nation,  
from one kingdom to another."

The Psalmist also recalls the tears of wandering:

"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept...How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

The Prophets preach, "Be a refuge to the outcasts of Moab." "Do no wrong or violence to the alien." "The aliens shall be to you as citizens, and shall also be allotted an inheritance." "Do no oppress the alien." "The messenger will bear witness against those who thrust aside the alien."

And the Jesus story has barely begun before another king is afraid a baby will rise up to supplant him. Mary and Joseph flee in the night to Egypt, taking only what they can carry, and they remain in Egypt until Herod dies. They head back to the land of Israel after Herod's death, but Joseph hears that the son, Archelaus, has replaced his father as ruler. Joseph turns around and heads to the district of Galilee, instead, to live in a town called Nazareth.

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, I and II Chronicles, the Psalter, Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Malachi, Matthew. This is not a sprinkling of a verse or two about being nice to a couple of good strangers who pull their own weight and don't make noise. This is a story that weaves in and out of all of scripture. A mindful God who is watching, attentive, caring for, calling to the poor, the stranger, the foreigner, the sojourner. Laws and commands coming from God to God's people to care for the same ones that God loves. An aching Divine heart that watched God's own people flee only to be enslaved only to be freed only to flee and wander again. God's law is written from the heart of this story. And if there is any Christian to wholly dismiss the Old Testament (well, expect for abusing a couple of verses that allow mangled interpretations to clobber people for their sexuality and gender orientation), the story of Jesus Christ himself begins with a midnight run across borders to keep the holy baby alive.

I am *not* making the case today for policy or declaring a march on Washington, though one certainly might become inspired to do both after studying these passages of scripture. I am making the case for living a life rooted to the heart of our sacred story. Our sacred story is rooted in the love of God. Our sacred story is rooted in seeing the

people that the power of empire doesn't want to see unless it can exploit them. Our sacred story tells us of a God that hears the cries of people who are suffering. Our sacred story tells us of a God who works against and in spite of the powers of empire who want to divide and oppress because they keep their power by dividing and oppressing.

Our sacred story tells us of mothers and fathers who grab their babies and children and whatever they can carry on their back because the food has run out and there are no more jobs and people actively want to kill them. Our sacred story tells us to care for and welcome and embrace these people who are fleeing. Our sacred story tells us to make room for them because we, too, might need some room to flee one day. Our sacred story tells us we have more than enough already and to share our resources with those who need the extra from our abundance.

I am making the case that *THIS* is the guiding story of our lives, the story through which we see and welcome and love now. I am making the case that this sacred story is still working its way through me in my own unloveliness, my own unwelcoming, my own blind-eye-turning, my own apathy, my own naval gazing, my own neutrality and silence for the sake of keeping the peace.

Read the words of sacred story with me, friends. Study them and whisper them aloud as prayer. *Do not oppress the alien. (Zechariah 7) If you do not oppress the alien...then I will dwell with you in this place.* (Jeremiah 7) *The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 19)*

*"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* (John 13) *"Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."* (1 John 3) *"Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God."* (1 John 4)

I am making the case that a response to oppressed people rooted in compassion, empathy, love, and welcome is a holy response. We may not want to get involved. We may want to keep the peace. We may not want to offend our neighbor with a differing opinion. I believe scripture implores us to let that stuff go. Let go of the apathy. Let go of the fear. Let go of the manners that require us to lie and harm others with our silence.

We are in a time, I pray it is but a season and a last flash, but we are in a time when hate is having quite a moment. Violent rhetoric is being matched by violent acts. Strangers and foreigners and aliens, the language of ancient scripture, are not just

trying to get across a human-made border, they are here in our city and have been for a very long time. In fact, the way “stranger” and “foreigner” and “outsider” is being defined often has little to do with nation of origin of papers of documentation. Who is in and who is out is now so complicated that it is dangerous. We enter this conversation—first and foremost— as people of faith. And as people of faith, we must choose how we will engage or not engage violent words. As people of faith, we must choose how we will respond, or not respond, to violent acts.

If you have any doubt about where God meets us in this story, migrate across the holy text once again. As you travel through ancient words and worlds, you will remember the God who remembers the oppressed. You will see the God who sees the ones beyond the city wall. You will hear the God who hears the cries of the people. May you feel in your bones the Divine call to Love over and over and over again. May you give thanks that the same holy welcome and love extended to the one who is far off is extended to you and to me because we are far off all the time in all kinds of ways. May you breathe deeply with awareness and gratitude for the breadth, and width, and length, and height of God’s love, fully revealed in Jesus the Christ, guiding us on each and every step of our journey. May that love be what guides you now, giving feet to faith in such a time as this. Amen.

# Biblical References to Immigrants and Refugees

All quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.  
Compiled by the United Churches of Christ [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org).

**Genesis 3:22-24** - Adam and Eve are forced out of the Garden.

**Genesis 7 and 8** - Noah builds an ark and takes refuge from the flood.

**Genesis 12:1** - The call of Abram: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."

**Genesis 12:10** - "Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land."

**Genesis 19** - Lot takes his family and flees Sodom.

**Genesis 23** - Abraham is a stranger and an alien in the land of Canaan.

**Genesis 46:1-7** - Jacob moves his family to Egypt to escape the famine and reunite with Joseph.

**Genesis 47: 1-6** - Joseph brings his brothers to Pharaoh and they are welcomed and given jobs.

**Exodus 1:8-14** - Joseph's generation is gone, and the Egyptians oppress the Israelites. "Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor."

**Exodus 1:15-2:10** - Pharaoh orders all the Hebrew boy babies to be killed, but Moses is hidden and is saved by Pharaoh's daughter.

**Exodus 12:37-39** - The Israelites were driven out of Egypt so fast they had no time to make provisions and had to bake unleavened cakes of bread.

**Exodus 12:49 and Leviticus 24:22** - "There shall be one law for the native and for the alien who resides among you."

**Exodus 22:21** - Moses gives God's law: "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien; for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."

**Leviticus 19:9-10 and 23:22** - Moses gives God's law: "You shall not strip your vineyards bare...leave them for the poor and the alien."

**Leviticus 19:33-34 and 24:22** - When the alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall

be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."

**Leviticus 24:23** - Moses receives God's law: "With me you are but aliens and tenants."

**Numbers 9:14 and 15:15-16** - "...you shall have one statute for both the resident alien and the native."

**Numbers 35 and Joshua 20** - The Lord instructs Moses to give cities of refuge to the Levites so that when the Israelites must flee into Canaan they may have cities of refuge given to them.

**Deuteronomy 1:16** - "Give the members of your community a fair hearing, and judge rightly between one person and another, whether citizen or resident alien."

**Deuteronomy 6:10-13** - The people of Israel are made aware that the land had come to them as a gift from God and they were to remember that they were once aliens.

**Deuteronomy 10:18-19** - "For the Lord your God...loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

**Deuteronomy 14:28-29 and 26:12-13** - Tithing was begun, in part, for resident aliens.

**Deuteronomy 24:14** - "You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land..."

**Deuteronomy 24:17-18** - "You shall not deprive a resident alien...of justice."

**Deuteronomy 24:19-22** - Leave sheaf, olives, grapes for the alien.

**Deuteronomy 26:5** - A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...

**Deuteronomy 27:19** - "Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien...of justice."

**I Chronicles 22:1-2** - Aliens were important in building the temple.

**I Chronicles 29:14-15** - David praises God: "We are aliens and transients before you..."

**II Chronicles 2:17-18** - Solomon took a census of all the aliens and assigned them work.

**Psalm 105** – Remembering their sojourn: “When they were few in number, of little account, and strangers in it, wandering from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another people,…”

**Psalm 137:1-6** – “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept… How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”

**Psalm 146:9** – “The Lord watches over the strangers…”

**Ecclesiastes 4:1** – “Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them.”

**Isaiah 16:4** – Be a refuge to the outcasts of Moab.

**Jeremiah 7:5-7** – “If you do not oppress the alien…then I will dwell with you in this place…”

**Jeremiah 22:3-5** – Do no wrong or violence to the alien.

**Ezekiel 47:21-22** – The aliens shall be to you as citizens, and shall also be allotted an inheritance.

**Zechariah 7:8-10** – Do no oppress the alien.

**Malachi 3:5** – The messenger will bear witness against those who thrust aside the alien.

**Matthew 2:13-15** – Jesus and parents flee Herod’s search for the child.

**Matthew 5:10-11** – “Blessed are those who are persecuted.”

**Matthew 25:31-46** – “...I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

**Luke 3:11** – “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none…”

**Luke 4:16-21** – “...Bring good news to the poor...release to the captives...sight to the blind...let the oppressed go free.”

**Romans 12:13** – “Mark of the true Christian: “...Extend hospitality to strangers...”

**II Corinthians 8:13-15** – “It is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need...”

**Ephesians 2:11-22** – “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.”

**Hebrews 11** – “By faith Abraham...set out for a place...not knowing where he was going.”

**Hebrews 13:1-2** - "...show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels..."

**James 2:5** - "Has not God chosen the poor in the world..."

**James 2:14-17** - "What good is it...if you say you have faith but do not have works?"

**I John 3:18** - "...Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

**I John 4:7-21** - "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God..." We love because God first loved us."