

Sermon Text for January 16, 2022

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 61:1-4, Matthew 2:13-21 ***“Jesus the baby a political refugee”***

On Friday I took a student from LS to go get take his driving test. He had failed it already three times and I had helped him learn how to parallel park a few months earlier. We were waiting for his turn to go when the driver instructor came in with a high school student and he told her dad, in Spanish, she was going way too fast, failed the parallel parking, and stopped so suddenly it nearly gave me whiplash, but I’m going to pass her. We were stunned, and I leaned over to him and said: I think you’re going to make it this time. He did, he passed.

On the way home he shared that he came from Nicaragua and we shared stories of when I was his age and spent a bit of time there. He said he and his family had to leave Nicaragua because his dad was in the government and it became obvious that if they stayed his dad’s life would be in danger. So they fled here, to the United States and they are doing very, very well. Did you know that Church World Service resettles 300 refugee families in the Lancaster area alone? We are in the epicenter of one of the most populous locations for refugees in the whole United States.

What is a refugee. It is someone who for a variety of reasons is not able to stay in their country and flees from their country, for political reasons, or economic reasons, or the way this country was founded, for religious reasons. I have no idea what it is like to have to pick up and leave your country because you know that people are actually looking for you and your family to harm you and your family. Don’t get it twisted, probably only one or two of you know what that is like, the rest of us, we have no idea. The closest I think I have ever come to understanding it was when we lived in Italy and our apartment got broken into and all of our stuff was thrown around helter skelter. We felt violated.

But that is nothing like Igbee from Ethiopia who was a student and led protests against the government and she was arrested, raped in prison, allowed to leave but told that she would be arrested again if she continued to speak out and she knew that she would have to leave her country and so she came to Russia, and then we resettled her in Washington DC. I don’t know what it is like to be Igbee, having to flee from your country not just out of fear of something horrific happening to you, but because something horrific already happened and more is threatened.

Jesus' father was told by an angel that he had to leave Bethlehem because the king was looking for him and if the king found him he would be killed. So they picked up and fled to Africa to find refuge. Jesus at the age of 2 was a refugee seeking shelter from those who would kill him, and so he found safety and protection in a country that was willing to help him. This is our Scripture for today. Let's read.

READ

As a pastor I have found that God has led me to similar experiences in most of my callings. When I was in Italy I was asked by the Federation of Protestant Churches to go down to the port of Salerno, the city where I was a pastor, and board a container ship because there were stowaways on the ship and a few of them might be minors. As the chaplain of an orphanage that could house the minor I boarded the ship, the captain met me and said by what authority was I boarding, I had no authority, and so I simply said, I am on a mission from God to see the stowaways that are minors. He let me on.

We met in a small cramped room and in shuffled 5 young men, I had no idea what age they were. I figured they came from English speaking African countries, but they did not, they were from a French speaking African country and so we were not able to make much headway. When I served in Florida we had a food bank and one day three young men came to it together and they told us of a story of how they were working on a farm not far from the church and the owners of the farm would not allow them to leave and so they had to run away.

We called the authorities and as a result they raided the camp on the farm and charged the owners with slave labor. These were your average every day American citizens who were being used and abused in that camp. When we lived in Russia we were in the heart of it. Many of our members were trafficked to Russia for sex trafficking and we worked hard to get them home by paying for their airfare and working with their embassies.

Those who had to flee from their country and could not return we worked with the United States Embassy and resettled over 30 people in the United States, you have met a handful of them, they came and visited us about 10 years ago. For some reason God has blessed us with the opportunity to do his work with men and women who are fleeing from their country or facing horrific conditions in their current life.

When you read the words of Isaiah 61 who comes to your mind? What people come to your mind who are oppressed, brokenhearted, prisoners...? Are you able to resonate with the statement that we hear that we are called to proclaim the good news, the Gospel to them? Is that really our job? Sometimes I wish you would just focus on the church and those of us in it and

not worry so much about what is happening outside of our walls. What about our own community?

When the prophet Isaiah writes these verses his people are returning back to their land after decades of being taken away into captivity as slaves to Babylon. When you hear vs.1-2 Isaiah is speaking about the people of God who were forced into slavery and now are ready to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, because the past years have been catastrophic. This dream of rebuilding is real to them, that dream mentioned in vs.4. The first time this verse came to life for me was when John Hartman read it when we were on a mission trip to Houston in the midst of a house that had been ravaged by a hurricane. What a promise that one day these walls will be built up, after a hurricane, after decades of slavery, after fleeing your country for safety.

50 times in Scripture we read God commanding us to treat the stranger with compassion, love, and as if he were a family member. Just a taste we find in Exodus 22:21 – then again in Leviticus 19:33-34 - . What about Jesus, what did he have to say? Look at Matthew 25:35. Jesus could personally relate to this because he knew what his life was like when he was a child growing up and not living in your own country because you could not return to your country because your life was in danger.

Let's look at Matthew 2 and the time when Jesus the king has to flee from his land in order for his life to be saved so that he could be the Savior. An angel appear again to Joseph, just like he did when he told him to marry Mary, and tells him to flee. He once again obeys the angel even though, like the first time, it would not have been the most sound advice from someone on the outside. Just divorce Mary and get on with your life. Don't take your child to Africa, why in the world would you do that? I remember when we went to Russia to be missionaries the one thing that people could not understand was what are we going to do with our kids? We said, take them with us, of course.

We see that the angel was right as Herod came and killed all of the children in Bethlehem two years of age and younger. Art history throughout history has captured this scene tragically. Can any of us imagine what this is like? And yet our modern history is filled with these examples that are not just relegated to the Holocaust but have taken place in Rwanda, Yugoslavia, Darfur, and now even today in Mynmar with the Rohingya. Children are being ripped from their mothers and slaughtered. This is not just a tragic Bible story, it is a horrific modern day event.

Have you ever thought of Jesus as a baby who was caught up in a political climate that necessitated his family to leave and flee into Africa for safety. It happened, that is a real part of

our Savior's life, so maybe we can understand why he says that the stranger is beloved by God in ways that we cannot understand.

We are so far removed from this, aren't we? Yet, are we? With 300 families a year pouring into our county, with Afghanis looking for refuge even in our neighborhood, with students at LS who have a clear memory of fleeing their country, almost a neighboring country to ours, for safety and protection. What kind of compassion and what kind of care do we have? We were helping to organize before the pandemic a prayer vigil for the refugee in Lancaster and we were trying to get as many churches involved as possible. I knew the head pastor to one of the megachurches in this region so I went and spoke to him and let him know about what we were doing and I asked him if he would just show up and pray with us. His first question to me was: are they legal? Are they legal? I can assure you that this was not even on Jesus' mind when he returned from Africa to go home. Am I legal?

Does God only have compassion on the legal? Jesus' status as a refugee impacted his life in how he approached the other, the stranger, the one who was different from him. Look at how he interacts with Samaritans, with women, with children. Our approach to others, who don't speak our language, or look different from us, has to be dictated not on what we are used to, but what Jesus requires of us. On this MLK weekend if we don't take the time to think about how do we do with that, then we aren't doing what God requires. Amen.