

“...I WAS A STRANGER” – THE PROMISE OF AMERICA

By Andrew Wilson
April 2, 2017

Genesis 47: 1-6, 27
Exodus 1: 6-17, 22

In 2015, Washington Post columnist Michael Gerson traveled to Syria to report on the civil war. In a piece titled, “The Children Among Syria’s Ruins,” he wrote this: “If American churches... are not relevant here, they are irrelevant.”

Let those words sink in. “If American churches are not relevant here, they are irrelevant.”

Gerson’s point is that if churches like LCPC are doing nothing to help people like Syria’s refugees, they deserve to be ignored. Do you think that’s true? If Jesus were here right now, what would he have to say about that?

There are currently about 60 million people in the world who have been forcibly displaced from their homes. There are more refugees in the world right now than there have been at any other time in history. About half of those refugees are children. Most refugees are living in countries adjacent to the countries from which they have fled. They’re living on the streets in dangerous slums. Or they’re living in refugee camps where even beds, bread and water are in short supply. An example of a developing nation that is helping its neighbor is tiny Lebanon. Within a total population of 4.5 million people, Lebanon houses about a million Syrian refugees. By the standards of Europe or America, Lebanon isn’t wealthy. But about 20% of the people within Lebanon’s borders are refugees.

In 2014 there was a huge spike in the refugee population. In that year alone, 170,000 refugees arrive on the shores of Italy in leaky boats. In 2015 many thousands more people either sailed to Greece or traveled overland from Turkey to Eastern Europe. Since 2014 around 1.4 million people have arrived in Europe in boats. Some of those people have been displaced by civil wars in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. Some of them are Africans who have been uprooted by extreme poverty and oppression. Virtually all of them are desperately seeking a new place to put down roots and call home.

In every country where the refugees have landed, whether it is Hungary, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Germany or France, people have responded with a mixture of compassion and trepidation. Many have been moved to help, and have created camps where the people can at least receive temporary food and shelter. Many more have urged their governments to turn asylum-seekers away, especially those arriving from majority Muslim nations like Syria.

The blow-back against all of these refugees was predictable. Even before they began to arrive, Europeans had been wrestling with multiple challenges. A slow-motion financial meltdown in Greece sent shockwaves throughout the Eurozone. Several terrorist attacks in Europe and America stoked fears of that Isis was on the move, and that Islamist fanatics were infiltrating once-safe nations. In November, 2015, multiple coordinated attacks in Paris left 130 people dead and many more injured. Subsequent investigations confirmed not only that the attacks had been motivated by Muslim extremists, but that

two of the assailants had arrived in Europe with a boatload of refugees. Not surprisingly, many commentators and politicians in France immediately demanded that the door be closed to refugees.

What happened to all those desperate people? Greece and Italy tried for months to convince the rest of the Eurozone states to open their doors and share the burden of caring for about 850,000 refugees. By the way, that number sounds gigantic, but it's actually only two tenths of a percent of the population of Europe. Most nations put up a stiff resistance. After months of negotiations a compromise was reached whereby the rest of the continent received 120,000 migrants. That amounted to only 11 percent of the total refugee population that had reached Italy and Greece in 2015 alone. In short, the response in Europe was minimal, and it left most refugees in a state of limbo.

Only a few months later, Germany welcomed about 890,000 refugees, most of them from Syria. Since that time German Chancellor Angela Merkel has been under merciless attack for putting the nation at risk and introducing undesirable cultural influences. Polls indicate that about half of the nation does not approve of welcoming Syrian refugees.

How has the United States responded? The Trump administration of course is preparing to build a wall along the border with Mexico. It is also seeking to enforce a temporary travel ban that targets six majority-Muslim nations. The stated goal of the policy is to protect the country from terrorists that might enter our country either as tourists or asylum-seeking refugees. Most people are familiar with those actions by our government. Less well known is the fact that the Obama administration deported more immigrants than any other administration in history. Or that the Obama administration admitted only 10,000 Syrian refugees in 2016. Over approximately that same period, Canada took in 25,000 Syrian refugees.

A generation ago Americans faced another refugee crisis, one that was precipitated by the 20-year-long Vietnam War. Our response to that crisis was very different. In the aftermath of the war, America led the way in providing sanctuary for asylum-seekers. Of the 1.3 million Vietnamese people who were resettled in the global north, America took in 800,000.

By the way, Shirley Carlson's Lenten blog tells the poignant story of how the Carlsons worked with their church to help one Vietnamese family to resettle in Cleveland, Ohio. I hope you'll read it today if you haven't done so already.

I'm not trying to stir up partisan politics. I'm trying to dramatize for you how much our country has changed when it comes to our treatment of refugees and immigrants. We are witnessing the biggest wave of forced mass migration since the Second World War. Yet the general drift for both parties recently has been in the direction of closing our borders and making it more difficult even for refugees from war-torn countries to become citizens. And I think it's appropriate for us, as Christians, to think about that in the light of scripture, and in the light of what the Lord has taught us.

Before we dig any deeper, I want to let you know: I don't have a theologically-grounded, five-point plan to resolve our immigration issues. That's not where I'm headed. These issues are complex, and there's certainly lots of room for disagreement among Christians when it comes to specific policies. I want us

instead to think about the broad principles that undergird the Bible's teachings about refugees and immigrants. What are those principles? And how might they apply in the context of our increasingly diverse nation? Those are the questions I think we should be asking.

One biblical principle that comes through loud and clear has to do with asylum-seekers. God tells his people to care for immigrants who would die or who would be enslaved or imprisoned if they returned home.

We just read about how Jacob and his sons fled to Egypt to escape famine, and how, with Joseph's encouragement, Pharaoh welcomed them. Later, God commands his people to extend to the foreigners in their midst the same dignity and kindness that was extended to them in Egypt. For example, he declares in Deuteronomy, chapter 10: "You are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt" (10:19).

One simple and direct application of that principle, it seems to me, is that we should go out of our way to help people who are new to our country and are having a hard time. Here in Southern California the opportunities to do that are all around us. Many of the families we assist through Family Promise or Kids Hope USA are recent immigrants. Some of you are second generation Americans who feel compelled to help new arrivals from the land of your ancestors. The Lord wants us to see the world through the eyes of newcomers, and to do what we can to help them feel welcome and included.

Does this principle apply also to asylum-seekers who would be imprisoned or killed if they returned to their homeland? Generally speaking, I believe it does. As Jesus followers, we can't ignore the cries of those who have been displaced by war or by extreme oppression. I believe the Lord calls us to stand up for those who have been beaten down. In our day, that means, at the very least, questioning immigration policies that keep out all but a tiny fraction of those seeking asylum.

Our whole approach to immigration is badly in need of reform. But we Christians need to remember that our obligation to stand with refugees and other immigrants has to be balanced with our obligation to protect our country. As terror threats mount, it makes sense for us to exercise an extra measure of caution in vetting refugees. The president believes the system we currently employ is inadequate. I think the odds are good that he's right about that. So let's get on with it. Let's overhaul the system so we can be more confident, as a nation, that the refugees we're admitting aren't wolves in sheep's clothing.

More than that, let's be honest about the need to scrutinize people who seek to emigrate from Muslim nations. Within the world of Islam there are fanatical splinter groups that seek to harm us, and to use terrorism to bring us to our knees. It's not racist and it's not outrageously paranoid for us to say that. To the contrary, it's foolish and even suicidal for us to deny it.

Issues relating to enforcement are important, but they're not the core issues. For example, we need to have an intelligent debate about the proposed wall along our southern border. But we have a far greater need to talk about what our immigration policies are meant to achieve. Almost everyone agrees that we need to limit immigration in some ways. But few people ever explain what limits they support and why.

Again, I think the Bible can help us. In both the Old and the New Testament we read again and again about outsiders who bring new life and new hope to God's people. That's a key theme, for example, in the Book of Joshua. Rahab was a prostitute living in the land that had been promised to Israel. She assisted the Israelites in capturing the city of Jericho. Rahab is lauded in the New Testament for her decision to live by faith.

The theme of the virtuous outsider is repeated in the Book of Ruth. Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi, remember, are from Moab. After their husbands die, a famine ravages Moab and they decide to migrate to Judah where Ruth begins a brand new life among the Israelites. Not only does Ruth become a model citizen, she also gives birth to children whose lineage is traced to David and to Jesus.

In the New Testament the outsider theme comes into focus as the church grows beyond the community of Jews in and around Jerusalem. The radical idea introduced by Paul is that the Gospel isn't just for the Jews, it's for all people. For Jesus followers, Paul insists, all of the things that divide people are set aside, and his church becomes one body. He writes in Galatians:

In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

- Galatians 3:26-28

A core message here is that God continually uses outsiders to renew and refresh his people. The broader principle, as it relates to immigration, is that our fears and suspicions of outsiders are often unwarranted. Certainly we've seen how God has used immigrants and refugees to strengthen and revitalize our own nation. Consider, for example, the economic contribution of the latest generation of immigrants. Among the Fortune 500 – the 500 largest corporations in America – no less than 90 of them were founded by immigrants. That figure more than doubles when you include companies founded by the children of immigrants.

But of course most of us don't worry about the people at the top. We don't worry about immigrants who arrive with money and skills. We worry about refugees who arrive with nothing and who take advantage of our generous social services. We worry about immigrants, legal or illegal, who take low wage jobs and thereby depress wages and increase unemployment for ordinary Americans.

As Christians we need to be sensitive to these concerns. The economic disruptions created by immigration are undeniable. But again, it's important for us to keep our eyes on the big picture. As the Bible reminds us again and again, outsiders often surprise us with unexpected blessing. That's true even for those like Rahab and Ruth who seem to have nothing to offer.

Let's change directions for a minute. I recently re-read Willa Cather's magnificent novel, *My Antonia*. It's the story of pioneer families struggling to scratch out a living on the Great Plains. The book is especially meaningful for me because it takes place in Nebraska, where I was born, and because my dad grew up

on a Nebraska farm that didn't have electricity or running water. The book follows the lives of two families. One of them has been in the country for several generations. The other has recently arrived from Bohemia. The Bohemians – Antonia's family – in the beginning are barely making it. They survive their first winter only because of the generosity of their neighbors. But they're scrappy. They learn quickly. They eventually help to tame the wild prairie, and turn the prairie into the world's bread basket.

The narrator of the story at one point reflects on the differences between the immigrant girls in his community and the girls who, like him, are American-born. I want to read you this extended passage because I think it speaks so powerfully to our broader American experience.

The Bohemian and Scandinavian girls could not get positions as teachers, because they had no opportunity to learn the language. Determined to help in the struggle to clear the homestead from debt, they had no alternative but to go into service [as maids and cooks]. Some of them, after they came to town, remained as serious and discreet in behavior as they had been when they ploughed and herded on their father's farm. Others, like the three Bohemian Marys, tried to make up for the years of youth they had lost. But every one of them did what she had set out to do, and sent home those hard-earned dollars. The girls I knew were always helping to pay for ploughs and reapers, brood-saws, or steers to fatten.

One result of this family solidarity was that the foreign farmers in our country were the first to become prosperous. After the fathers were out of debt, the daughters married the sons of neighbors – usually of like nationality – and the girls who once worked in Black Hawk kitchens are today managing big farms and fine families of their own...

I thought the attitude of the town people towards these girls very stupid. If I had told my schoolmates that Lena Lingard's grandfather was a clergyman, and much respected in Norway, they looked at me blankly. What did it matter? All foreigners were ignorant people who couldn't speak English...

The Black Hawk boys looked forward to marrying Black Hawk girls, and living in a brand-new little house with best chairs that must not be sat upon, and hand-painted china that must not be used....

The country girls were considered a menace to the social order. Their beauty shone out too boldly against a conventional background. But anxious mothers need have felt no alarm. They mistook the mettle of their sons. The respect for respectability was stronger than any desire in Black Hawk youth.

We often forget that we're a nation of immigrants – that all but a very few of us are the offspring of people who were newcomers to America. Throughout history God has used immigrants and refugees to strengthen our nation. We hear it said again and again that immigrants don't assimilate, and that if we want to retain what's left of our cherished American values we have to close the door to immigrants. But isn't the problem one of our own making? Isn't the problem that we've forgotten the promise of America, and we've gotten very bad at passing along our values and beliefs to our children?

I hope that we, as a church, will go the extra mile to welcome the stranger. I hope we'll think deeply about the ways that our lives are blessed by the millions of immigrants who surround us right here in LA. I hope we'll remember that immigrants aren't a threat to our civilization – they *are* our civilization.