

## Loving the Stranger

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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### Text

Deuteronomy 10: 12-22 (adapted from The Inclusive Bible)

And what now, Israel, does God ask of you? Only this: that you stand in awe of God; that you walk in all of God's ways; that you love and serve God with all your heart and soul, 13 and that you keep the commandments and obey the statutes of God— statutes which, for your good, I lay down today. 14 To God belongs heaven and the highest of heavens, the earth and all that it contains— 15 yet the Almighty so loved your ancestors that you, their descendants, were chosen before all other peoples, and so it still is today. 16 Sensitize your hearts, therefore, and bend your will! 17 For our God is the God of gods, the Sovereign of sovereigns, the great God, powerful and awe-inspiring, who has no favorites and cannot be bribed; 18 who brings justice to the orphan and the widowed, and who befriends the foreigner among you with food and clothing. 19 In the same way, you too must befriend the foreigner, for you were once foreigners yourselves in the land of Egypt. 20 It is God Most High, whom you must serve with awe; whom you must cling to and by whom you must swear; 21 who is your praise; who is your God; who has done great things which your eyes have seen with awe. 22 Your ancestors went down into Egypt seventy strong, and God has made you as numerous as the stars of the heavens.

### Sermon

She appears in my dreams. A decade ago, she appeared in my dreams for the first time, and I still encounter her there some nights. She is a refugee. A sojourner and a stranger.

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While I admit I don't spend a lot of time in Deuteronomy, it fascinates me. It's part of the identity building of the Israelites. They are a newly liberated people, having been enslaved for four hundred years, and they have spent a long time walking in the wilderness, listening to God, and figuring out how to live in covenant as a liberated people with a special relationship to God.

Walk in God's ways, love and serve God, and remember where you have come from - let where you have come from and what God has done for you inform what you will do for others.

You know I have drawn our Lent series of readings from those suggested in a series on creation care and environmental justice by Rev. Emma Brewer-Wallin, minister for economic and environmental justice at our conference. We started Lent with Matthew 25 - in which Jesus asks his followers to tend to the most vulnerable and marginalized: the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned, the sick, and the stranger. Connecting those invitations to concern with creation care and climate change is our shared Lenten journey.

Today's reading from Deuteronomy parallels so closely Matthew 25's concerns. Love and serve God, to whom the earth belongs, "who brings justice to the orphan and the widowed, and who befriends the foreigner among you with food and clothing. 19 In the same way, you too must befriend the foreigner, for you were once foreigners yourselves in the land of Egypt."

In another translation it says, love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (NRSV)

Remember, you were a foreigner in the land of Egypt...let that inform how you treat strangers and sojourners. I think that imperative is at its core a commandment to empathy.

And - it's not just about doing good - it's about what is good for the people.

You don't have to look far in the Bible to find this theme repeated:

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.  
- Exodus 22:21

<sup>34</sup>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 19:34

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Hebrews 13

Befriend the foreigner, love the stranger, show hospitality.

Do good, for your own good, remembering God was good to you.

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But what does this have to do with creation and climate justice?

Simply put, climate change has created a refugee crisis. How can we care for the stranger, the traveler, the refugee displaced by climate change?

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Some of you may not know that I spent several years before I came to Pilgrim basically bi-vocational. In addition to church ministry, I spent a lot of time on climate action, and indeed it has been a pretty big shift to focus solely on pastoring. I was a climate activist in part because of dreams that I had a decade ago, the kind of dreams that woke me up in the middle of the night. Dreams about the world I'd leave to my child. And dreams about someone else.

Habiba, a young Somali girl, started appearing in my dreams. In the summer of 2011 she had to walk with her family to a Kenyan refugee camp. They were there because they couldn't find food in the midst of the worst famine and drought in 60 years, and they were among over 400,000 drought refugees - among 13 million people endangered by that drought. Their story was told by Church World Service's Sammy Matua, which is how I learned her name.<sup>1</sup> Habiba, he said at the time, might not reach adulthood - because of climate change. "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs."

There's a folk tale, I know you know it, where townspeople see a baby floating down the river, so they rescue the baby and then they see more babies and they rescue the babies, and then someone says, I've got to go up river and stop who ever is putting babies in the water.

Church World Service focuses on the needs of people on the ground, but like the people in that folk tale, they have been looking upriver.

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<sup>1</sup> The article is no longer on the CWS website.

“It's very clear. People need to know that the impact of climate change is here with us and it is hitting the most vulnerable people in the world the hardest.”

CWS has for more than a decade called on the US government and the UN to take leadership on mitigating climate change through reducing carbon emissions. The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu called on the international community to act on climate change for the sake of the children of the most vulnerable regions of our world.

All of that was true a decade ago. And here's the update. At least 22-26 million people annually are displaced from their homes by weather disasters worldwide.<sup>2</sup> There may be as many as 100 million folks annually world wide displaced by climate change related disasters.<sup>3</sup> Right now we're focusing a lot of attention on the emergency of many millions of internally displaced folks and refugees from Ukraine, as well we should. But climate change related displacement has been happening on a larger scale for many years. It is also an emergency. And it is happening in North America, South America, Asia, island countries, Africa, Europe.

A decade ago, children were keeping me up at night. Habiba, a beloved daughter of God, who in 2011 had no place but a tent to live, no reliable source of water or food, because of climate change. Zachary, my own child and another of God's children, whose world will be defined by climate change. Every single one of our children, our grandchildren, *the world's children*. In First John, we are told that if we love God, we will love one another, love God's children. If we love God's children, should we not make the earth safe for them? All over the Bible we're told to care for the stranger remembering that we have been strangers. To welcome the traveler because in doing so, we welcome Jesus himself. But, our faith calls us not just to welcome the stranger once they arrive at our doorstep - but to ask what we can do to prevent them from becoming refugees in the first place.

Habiba is still in my dreams, though I do not know what became of her.

So the challenge, in addressing the climate refugee crisis, is two-fold.

First, to do what we can to serve the needs of those already displaced from their homes whether by violence, like those from Tigray fleeing to Sudan, those from Ukraine fleeing to other countries - or those displaced by storm, flood, drought or famine.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/why-unhcr-is-taking-action-on-climate-change-displacement/>

<sup>3</sup>

<https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/stories/2021/11/618a301d5/climate-change-emergency-everywhere.html>

Second, to reduce our own impact on this planet, and to call upon our leaders to support mitigation and adaptation measures. To go up the river.

A member of a nearby church used to start every prayer time with the same words: for swift and sensible action on global climate change. What I realize today is that his prayer was a prayer for the wellbeing of Habiba, and every climate refugee around the world.

It's hard to find good news about the refugee crisis in these days, but there is good news wherever people are offering hospitality, befriending the stranger. There is good news every move we make to lower carbon emissions and build climate resiliency. That is all happening. But perhaps we need to make more good news. As Howard Zinn once wrote:

If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places — and there are so many — where people have behaved magnificently, *this gives us the energy to act*, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.

May it be so.

Amen.