

That Could Be Me
1 Kings 8: 22-30, 41-43

The biblical law treats immigrants, refugees, and really anybody on the move with the same strict compassion that scripture holds for orphans and widows. The sacred text considers immigrants and refugees extremely vulnerable and commands people of faith to receive them with hospitality and care. “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.” From the priestly laws of Leviticus to the Covenant Code in Deuteronomy, it’s hard to think of any topic that is mentioned more frequently than treatment of the stranger. Many of the most memorable stories in the Hebrew Bible have people on the move at their center. In the book of Genesis, Sarah and Abraham painstakingly travel across the desert and find the presence of God in every place they stop to lay their heads. Joshua is sold by his brothers into slavery and held in one of Pharaoh’s prisons for years. The book of Exodus, the people of Israel held captive in Egypt, displaced to the wilderness for forty years, finally delivered to the Promised Land. Ruth and Naomi are driven by drought and crop failure away from all that is familiar to them. They are saved by their oath of fidelity to each other. Even the books of Samuel and Kings are largely about the ever present threat of displacement and the establishment of a permanent home. When Solomon dedicates the Temple in Jerusalem, he mentions that this house of worship will be for all God’s people, not just the Hebrews who worship locally but for any foreigner coming into their land. In Luke’s Gospel Jesus is born under a hostile government. Matthew says that his parents had to flee the country.

From cover to cover the biblical narrative is sensitive to the causes of migration - drought and famine, displacement by war, hostile neighbors and corrupt governments. Often when the law mandates hospitality to the stranger, the legal precept is accompanied by a spiritual justification: remember that you yourself were once strangers in a foreign land. We extend hospitality to others because we have been in their position before. Remember that it has been your community that was once in need - perhaps not in your lifetime, but this is why the biblical imagination cultivates in us a very long memory. Of course it is hard for Americans, who have enjoyed so much peace at home for so long, to remember our times of extreme need and desperation. But all of us come from communities that have relied upon the hospitality that another has provided. Welcome to others is necessary because this mortal life we share is contingent on circumstances none of us control. The crops fail. The government falls. One occupation ends and another begins.

Most news watching Americans have been consumed this week with the politics of decision making. Right decision, wrong decision? Who failed to see this coming? It comforts us to live in the illusion that we are in charge of our own circumstances and that our actions - or the actions of our leaders - shape events and influence the world. But the biblical narratives of migration tell a different story about how human beings are shaped by events. These narratives remind us that none of us - not the smartest, not the strongest, not the most powerful among us, not even the greatest systems we can build together - are supreme actors. We are creatures of God's power. We are subjects of God's creation. Because we are creatures and our existence is contingent on circumstances we do not control, then we are dependent on one another. The mutual relationships that we share, the gifts of love, the gestures of hospitality that see us through difficult times are necessary for our survival and flourishing. We might say that our interdependencies are gifts

of God's grace. That's why it's so important for people of faith to remember the biblical mandates of hospitality. When one community is in need another provides.

I have watched the events in Afghanistan this week from the same distance from which I have often ignored this war. I was 13 years old on September 11, 2001, and I can still remember my dad dropping me off at school one day. We were listening to the news of war in Afghanistan, and my father told me this war would probably define my generation in the same way that Vietnam had defined his. I have sometimes felt ashamed when speaking to military servicepeople in the past twenty years because their lives have been shaped profoundly by the war in ways that mine has not. When I graduated from college in 2009, many of my friends held jobs that took them in some way to Afghanistan - if not in the armed forces, then as civilians working in the immense development and capacity building operations that our country has sponsored. About Afghanistan, there are so many ways in which I think - with slightly different circumstances, that could have been me.

Scripture suggests that can be a very productive feeling. That could have been me. We could all be in different circumstances, afflicted by war or famine. Scripture says that everybody is on the move at some point, so when we relate to our neighbors let us remember the mutual dependencies by which we all navigate life at one time or another. Those images and videos of Afghans at the Kabul airport have been so heartbreaking to see. There is an emergency resettlement effort underway. Can you imagine what it must be like to be at that airport this week with nothing but the clothes on your back, not concerned about where the airplane will land but only that it will take off?

This summer I read a novel called *The Sympathizer*, by Viet Than Nguyen. The author's family had fled Vietnam after the fall of Saigon. The novel is about the layers of identity that he holds as a refugee, an Asian person, and an American.

His book made me think about the generations of Vietnamese Americans who have been shaped by their resettlement in this country. And now there are perhaps 50-70,000 Afghans who worked with the Americans in some capacity and now, if they can even be relocated, will be starting their lives in a strange place. Their lives have already been so defined by political and military forces beyond their control. And now they are forced to undertake a great biblical migration.

Remember the law recorded repeatedly through the text: “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan.” It’s not just that loving our neighbors is the right thing to do. Harsh treatment of immigrants is an affront to God. To turn away the stranger would be to claim that we have power that we do not possess. It is to claim that we are more than human by failing to imagine that we could ever be in their predicament. When we relate to any immigrant or refugee, we remember the law. We see in our neighbors our own humanity. We were strangers once. It is a confession of our faith in God to say: That could just as well be me.