

Strangers to the Kingdom

Deuteronomy 10: 12-21 Ephesians 2: 11-22

We knew about the refugee crisis plaguing Europe as individuals and families flee war-torn Syria, and in lesser numbers from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya where ongoing conflict has ruined peoples' lives, put them under constant threat, and made them desperate enough to risk their lives to escape their homelands.

We knew about ISIS, the latest manifestation of highly organized terrorist violence to emerge in the Middle East. We knew how vicious and uncompromising their tactics were. We knew that the scope of their operations and their affiliates was huge, having extended far beyond the battlegrounds of Syria and Iraq. They made us forget about al-Qaida. More worrisome was the popularity of ISIS in gaining enlistees from around the world.

Then the multiple, highly organized, well planned attacks came in Paris. Scores were killed and hundreds injured, and the world was horrified. Sadly, attacks occurred on the same day in Beirut that killed 30 people and injured hundreds, the primary targets being Shi'ite Muslims. The Beirut carnage was virtually unreported, as were previous attacks elsewhere – a brief blip in the news from out-there-somewhere-that - doesn't-matter-to-me, where people die off my personal radar screen. But Paris was different. Paris is Paris, a stellar metropolis in the civilized world. Terror in Paris is like terror in New York; it's something that matters. It strikes close to home and it makes us feel vulnerable, unlike attacks in Lebanon, Africa, or Turkey in July when about 100 people were killed in the capital Ankara and hundreds injured – you remember that one, right? No, it wasn't Paris; it was someplace else out there where people die all the time and no one really notices. But that's another sermon, really.

Amid the ongoing crush in Europe of refugees surging across borders to find a new place to call home, the President announces plans to accept 10,000 refugees from the Middle East. It is a token number since tiny Sweden has accepted over 120,000 refugees and expects to have 170,000 by year's end. Sweden's total population is less than 10 million, about half the population of Florida.

Leading political figures denounced acceptance of these refugees. Governors of 20 states said they wouldn't accept them. Indiana's governor Mike Pence threatened charitable organizations seeking to re-settle just two families from the Middle East. Even Congress, in a bi-partisan vote, sought to quash reception of these refugees.

While it's appalling to me at any time of the year, the irony hasn't been lost that this comes before Thanksgiving. The Thanksgiving narrative is about the natives of the land helping refugees to survive when their backs were up against the wall. It's a jarring juxtaposition. 'But our ancestors weren't terrorists,' you say. Well, neither are these people. On the other hand, our ancestors, mine among them, would unleash ghastly terror on those native peoples before long.

No, these people whom the President wants to bring to our once great nation have languished in refugee camps in Jordan for three years, waiting to get clearance through the 21 step alphabet soup of government agencies who take exceptional pains to identify and verify and screen refugees in a process that typically takes two years. If you were a terrorist trying to get access to the United States, this would be a really bad methodology. It would be much easier to go to Canada and walk across the border. Due to the scrutiny that all refugees receive anywhere they go, it's a stupid plan for terrorists who, if they've proven anything, it's that they aren't that stupid.

I was gratified by the Christian witness of most faith leaders and organizations who chastised those officials who have sought to refuse the refugees. The only Christian figure who supported refusal was Franklin Graham who, if it were not for his father, would be of no account to anyone. The rest of the Christians, real Christians, understood the gospel, hearkened to the voice of the Lord, and stood firmly on the demands of the Kingdom of God.

This is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the liturgical calendar. We start the journey anew next Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent (already!). And by the way, we will find at the end of the Nativity story that the holy family became refugees who fled to Egypt, but we'll get to talk about that in few weeks, right?

On this Sunday, we reflect on the King, our Savior Jesus, and his Kingdom, which is what the faith of our Lord is all about. If we've learned anything this year, we should be fully aware that the demands of the Kingdom often stand in marked contrast, if not in direct opposition, to the accepted ways of the world and the (sometimes) practical wisdom that gets espoused as authoritative.

Citizens of the Kingdom, professing Jesus as Lord, have a very different set of standards and values. Jesus models for us how sacred citizenship is supposed to look. As a Jew, he draws on the best values and traditions of the Judaism, re-orienting the perspective from the demands of Torah-Law to the spirit of Torah-Law, seeking to recover that which is truly sacred from the irrelevancies that cloud the hearts and minds of the faithful.

He lifts up values that we see throughout the Hebrew scriptures, but may not notice as our eyes fail to recognize the radical nature of the words presented. Deuteronomy 19 is one of those passages that our eyes may glide over.

Our passage starts: *So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you?* Wait a minute; we had those words last week, only it was the prophet Micah saying the exact same thing; *What does the Lord require of you?* In Micah, the answer was to 'do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.' In Deuteronomy, it isn't a whole lot different, just not so compact and memorable: *Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being.* Not as elegant, but the point is clear. The Lord your God has a different way and a different attitude which

you need to learn and adopt as your own, and they're spelled out in these commandments and decrees.

It gets right into circumcision, doesn't it? But it isn't the foreskin of the la-de-da that gets referred to, much to male relief and assuaging female confusion. It says: *Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your **heart**, and do not be stubborn any longer.*

God describes just who God is, reminding them, *For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing.* God is the One who stands and rules above all pretenders. This God is just toward the ones who you choose to ignore, exclude, and oppress – the widows and orphans. Okay, we know all that.

Don't move on just yet though; there is one more thing that we cannot omit: this God *loves the strangers* or aliens in the land, and provides for their well-being, too. At this, God's people might be wondering out loud. 'Wait, I thought you were the God who takes care of God's people. What do strangers and aliens have to do with anything? I thought you were our God exclusively?'

Then God lets the other shoe drop for his people. *You shall also love the stranger* – say what? Wait a minute – these aren't my people! They aren't my problem. Why should I care about them? *For **you** were strangers in the land of Egypt,* God reminds them. And, by the way, you people are going to be strangers when you eventually get to the Promised Land. And if you want to look much further ahead, you're going to be spending a lot of time being strangers and aliens in a lot of places.

God is making several points. One is that God is concerned about people beyond those with whom God has an immediate covenantal relationship; God is bigger than one exclusive relationship. Another is that God cares about the weakest people in a society, and God expects the faithful to fully embrace God's concern for these aliens and strangers as well as the other poor, weak, and vulnerable in their midst. And God has made it perfectly clear that these principles are not negotiable, so you can save your self-justifying rationales for being sinfully disobedient.

How quickly and conveniently God's people forget what the Kingdom and the covenant and the good news are all about; it's imperative of love, grace, justice and peace, and its practice of embracing the whole breadth and depth of the human family, whether they are like you or not, whether they believe as you believe or not.

Paul's letter to the congregation in Ephesus is a reminder to them of what it means to be the living body of Christ. Faith in the Lord is not to be divided. It should not be Jews of Jesus and Gentiles of Jesus, or Gentiles of Jesus needing to become Jews of Jesus. Jesus takes away those old familiar labels that define who is in and who is out, who belongs and who gets rejected. The dividing wall between peoples is removed in Jesus who unites and reconciles and brings peace where hostility and enmity had previously reigned.

The King and his Kingdom takes those who were once, as Paul put it, *aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world*. Having no covenantal relationship on their own, and having no promise of one apart from Jesus, then they had neither hope nor God. This meant they were lost *to* the world, an existence that ended in death. But through Jesus, they were united to his promise, pulled from the world's grasp and given new life. There were no longer aliens and strangers, but brothers and sisters in Christ and fellow citizens of the Kingdom.

According to Ephesians: *[Jesus] create[s] in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through the cross*. Aliens and strangers are no more; all are united in Jesus and the vision of the Kingdom expands anew to embrace those who had always been excluded.

Just as Deuteronomy shocks its readers by extending a gracious welcome and hospitality to aliens and strangers, it is only slightly different when Paul writes to the faithful in Ephesus. Paul emphasizes the peace that Christ brings. We'll be talking about that, too, during Advent.

We ought to be thinking about peace instead of warfare and hostility. We ought to be able to recognize the nature of peacemaking that begins by bringing the victims of strife into a place of safety and security. The bulletin cover shows a desperate family fleeing across a river in Vietnam. The description of the photo on the back page notes that the family is fleeing US bombing. Let that sink in for a minute. They aren't fleeing from the enemy; they're fleeing from what we have brought to the conflict.

Our belief in a military answer to terrorism, that better security and high walls like Israel will bring security is a sad and foolish myth. We decimated al-Qaida, and I think one reason no one was taking ISIS seriously was because we had decimated al-Qaida. How bad could ISIS be? The answer is worse, and the characteristics of their recruits indicate that it is not marginal people, coerced people, duped people, but very intelligent people who are very clear about what they're doing and why.

Lessons need to be learned, but fearing, hating, and despising the alien and the stranger simply maintain walls of hostility. That leaves us unchanged and their motivations unanswered. Our witness to the peace and love of Christ has to be better, and spiritual people with faith in the true King, and reaching for the values of the Kingdom, can discover that way.