

Our Shared Immigration Story

Shared at Shadow Rock United Church of Christ

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Hebrews 11

By Faith

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he^[a] considered him faithful who had made the promise. 12And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

The New Colossus

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. **"Give me your tired, your poor,***

***Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"***

This poem by Emma Lazarus is graven on a tablet within the pedestal on which the statue stands.

What is the difference between an immigrant and an illegal alien? We tend to define this in a narrow way and in a way that advantages those who are in power and privilege.

An immigrant is a person who is not a citizen but comes to this country and seeks the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship through legal means. An illegal alien is a person (I hope we can agree that such a person is a human being) who is not a citizen and comes to this country and stays in this country through illegal means.

In both categories some are criminals and some are not.
In both categories some seek the privileges of citizenship but avoid the responsibilities.

We tend to define the distinction in a narrow way and we change the legal process so as to advantage some and disadvantage others. In other words, the vision and the ideals of Emma Lazarus' poem is something we sometimes get right and sometimes we dim and even extinguish the light of hope and freedom.

Immigrant movements in this country have always met resistance and prejudice and this country has always benefited from every immigrant movement. Too often our ideals are matters of convenience and determined by money and race.

"In the early part of the twentieth century, Mexican nationals began entering the United States in growing numbers as they fled the economic and political dislocation of the Mexican Revolution. Newspapers of the Southwest described this movement as an "invasion," with one describing the migrants as "a horde of the copper-colored natives of the war-torn republic." Such accounts are not hard to locate in the historical record, forming as they do the majority of the printed responses to the historical phenomenon.

Despite this clear racialized fear, these "invaders" entered the U.S. legally. The condition of this legality had little to do with them but everything to do with the United States. In this period, the U.S. erected no meaningful barriers to the entrance of immigrants—the one great exception being Chinese, who were formally banned from migration beginning in 1882, bestowing upon those who managed to circumvent this law the distinction of being this nation's first "illegal immigrant." Irish, Italian, English, German, and, yes, even Mexican migrants found little impediment to their movement and integration into the national

economy. They fulfilled an economic need, and were often believed to be biologically suited to the kinds of labor asked of them."

(Tomás Summers Sandoval, a Chicano professor of History and Chicana/o ~ Latina/o Studies at a small liberal arts college in Southern California.)

In the movie, *The Good Shepherd* there is an interesting conversation between a legal immigrant who is also part of the mafia and the man who heads up covert operations of the CIA. I think the conversation is very interesting as it reveals how entrenched and defined the United States is by White Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture.

"Joe Parmi," asks:

*"We Italians, we got our families and we got the Church. The Irish, they have their homeland. The Jews, they have their tradition. Even the n*gg*rs, they got their music. What about you people, Mr. Wilson, what do you have?"*

"Edward Wilson," replies:

"The United States of America. The rest of you are just visiting."

I hear the racism and economics of the issue. As one who worked in non-profit service organizations I know how difficult it is to provide services with little or no money. I believe people when they say that our schools, hospitals, and social services are overwhelmed. I am sympathetic to the people and organizations but I do not believe this is an issue of scarcity and no room at the table. I believe this is an issue of economic priorities and ethically making room at the table of our national household.

Last week I put forth a simple theological principle: Communion Shapes Community, that is, who we invite and sit down at the table with us, shapes our "family". I want to add to this principle another idea for us as people of faith. Theology does more than the social functions of establishing communities, addressing core problems of human life and meaning, and confirming foundational moral rules of human conduct. Theology is a mode of offering access to communication with a transcendent ever-present. This is the claim of three world religions and our shared founding patriarch, Abraham.

Within months of 911 Bruce Feiler came out with a second book. His first book was *Walking the Bible*. It was a geographic walk through the historical key places where biblical history unfolded. His second book was called, *Abraham; A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*. This second book is a fast read about the patriarch of three world religions; Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. I think Feiler was writing and releasing this book as an attempt to emphasize the common ground we have as "people of the Book" and as the spiritual children of Abraham.

On pages 18 through 19 Feiler writes of Abraham, "He has no mother. He has no past. He has no personality. The man who will redefine the world appears suddenly, almost as an

afterthought, with no trumpet fanfare, no fluttering doves... [Abram]...goes on to abandon his father at age seventy-five, leave his homeland, move to Canaan, travel to Egypt, father two sons change his name, cut off part of his penis, do the same for his teenager and newborn, exile his first son, attempt to kill his second, fight a world war, buy some land, bury his wife, father another family, and die at one hundred-seventy-five."

"To be a descendant of Abraham is to...glance back at your native land, to peer ahead to your nameless destination, and to wonder, 'Do I have the courage to make the leap?'"

What does it mean to leave the familiar? The story of Abraham is a story about a man and a woman who leave their families, the town they knew, the people they knew, and the life they knew. They leave all they know in order to become strangers in a strange land.

The biblical narrative has something to say to all parties.

To the immigrant.

To the homelander.

I am not relying on Scripture as justification for revolution and reversing the structure of the existing social order, as liberals propose. I am not proof-texting the Scripture to justify order or national identity. Instead I am asking us to focus on the immigrant experience which is one of suffering, struggle, and faith as people try to reshape their lives as strangers in a foreign land.

Our faith tradition has something to say to the immigrant and the homelander, and we need both messages to inform our responses to this complicated issue. Our faith tradition promises eventual deliverance and success for the immigrant who is open to the Word about life, God's presence, and God's influence in history.

For the homelander our faith tradition admonishes us to remember our ancestors' immigrant experience and make a place at the table and provide a hospitality which is characteristic and reflective of God's nature.

Let us acknowledge the issues and the complexity of the issue.

It is too easy to generalize, stereotype and demonize people different from ourselves and challenge our view of life. Let us remember that the immigrant experience includes prayers for jobs, the completion of doctoral dissertations, may God help a family member cross the river and the desert, do a good job and know the blessings of service for pay that is minimum wage or less. They pray for touches of grace as much as for justice.

And we pray to be instruments of grace and to be instruments of the justice they pray for.

They share their stories with each other of answered and unanswered prayer in their communities of faith. We share our stories of answered and unanswered prayer.

All of us are immigrants. All of us are strangers in a strange land. The spiritual and physical landscapes may differ but our human narratives are the same.

Faith is not just the injection of hope like emotional opium of the oppressed people. It is the foundation upon which we interpret our individual lives and our life together. All of us are aliens in a strange land and part of the immigrant narrative or none of us belong to that story of struggle and grace.

Like Abraham we leave our towns and our families to come to unfamiliar and strange places. Like Abraham we leave the familiar with the faith that God is with us every step of the journey.