

Sermon – Proper 14 – St Luke and St Matthew, Brooklyn

Luke 12: 32-40

Many of you, like me are immigrants to this country. At some stage in our life we felt moved in spirit and body to seek out a better life. We might have explored options that were open to us. Considered questions about opportunity. Scoured the best education institutions. Looked at where our extended family had settled. We might have prayed that God would show us the way and make smooth the path before us.

We would have packed up our lives, said our farewells and embarked on a journey that would ultimately change our lives. Hopefully you were able to realize your dreams of getting a better education, securing a better, well paying job, finding a home and raising a family. Hope was fulfilled if the opportunity we sought was found and we were rendered happy and contented with our situation.

As Christians who derive our faith from Jesus Christ, scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit, we might have found many parallels of our experience in scripture. For scripture can be seen as the ultimate migration narrative. Our forefathers and mothers were moved by God to seek out better lives, to journey from slavery to freedom, to flee oppressors and to move to where food and a safer life were promised.

First it was Noah's descendants who migrated east to the land of Shinar. Then it was Torah, Abraham's father who migrated from Ur in Babylon to Haran, west of Assyria. But the most compelling migration was by Abraham, Sarah and Lot.

Abraham was the first to hear God calling him to pack up his household and to move to a land that God had not yet specified. In the call Abraham heard, God's blessing was promised upon he and Sarah, that God would make them a great nation.

Abraham and Sarah were not materially poor but they did experience insecurity and discomfort. Sarah was infertile and unable to conceive a child, an important heir for their family. She heads a long line of biblical women who faced the cultural and religious stigma of infertility. Both were quite old when they headed off on their journey and had to endure another 25 years before Sarah conceived.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews recounts the faith of Abraham and Sarah. He reminds us that faith "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." This letter urges the faithful to follow Christ's example and live as he did, faithful, hopeful, loving and patient in the face of persecution. Abraham heard God's call and followed not knowing where it would lead. This is the call of all Christians who must step forth in their Jesus centered life, not knowing where God is leading.

Whether we have experienced a physical relocation from our birth country to the United States, or whether we have experienced a spiritual relocation from a place without God at the center to a

place where God informs all we do, or both, we have migrated. Along this journey of migration we hopefully found acceptance and welcome.

I couldn't help feeling the parallel between our migration journeys and the journey of an asylum seeker in today's world. If you lived in a Central American country and faced the daily challenge of raising a family where there is a constant threat of violence and lack of legal recourse or justice, you would want to move to a place of safety and peace. If you were constantly worried that your children would be enticed or threatened to join a gang or that education at a school required a street knowledge, caution and risk management akin to that of a military person in a conflict zone, you would want to move to a better country.

Very often it is the poorest and most vulnerable who are most receptive to God's summons to faith, and it is the poor and most vulnerable that make up the bulk of today's asylum seekers.

Central and South American countries are home to 40% of the world's total Roman Catholic population. In Central American countries between 60%-92% of the population was raised Roman Catholic. Currently in Central American countries half the population is Roman Catholic and 40% identify as protestant.

It makes some sense therefore if residents of those countries, who experience poverty, violence and dislocation, would find solace in the migration narratives found in scripture. It would make sense that the call God made of Abraham to pack up his household and move to a land of blessing, would be a similar call to that heard by people of faith in Central and South American countries. Likewise the promise we hear Jesus make in this morning's gospel reading that it is "your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms," is a promise that would drive on a family to seek asylum in the Promised Land.

Faith that God is working in our lives when we experience a call to migrate involves trusting that God is active in human history and is bringing all things to completion in Jesus Christ. The new city, the new life that is promised, might be a new homeland, a better country where we can settle in peace, or a new outlook on life where we can be more neighborly and Christ centered. It is faith that moves us forward because God has promised a better place for all of us.

When we have found a better place and have become settled we are called to become the welcomers, the agents of God who help facilitate the journey of others. It is for this reason that we must welcome asylum seekers and refugees to our country. We must welcome them trusting that we are all part of God's plan for building the kingdom on earth. Remember the second part of the Lord's Prayer – "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The kingdom Jesus tells his disciples about is their inheritance, a place where their treasure is waiting for them.

Jesus said to his disciples "do not be afraid, little flock" to reassure them that they are a part of a larger plan, of which much cannot be seen. Faith helps us not to be afraid of the future because faith allows us to hope that God's got this and that all God asks of us is to be ready, ready to move when called.

The current wave of domestic terrorism by white supremacists is largely driven by fear of the other, or fear that somehow we are being invaded by brown people. The core of the fear is that white people will lose power and position in society, and presumably become subject to similar injustices that asylum seekers and refugees are currently subjected to. As I have said before fear is a powerful emotion that causes people to do irrational things.

So how do we counter the current level of fear and hatred that is mounting against asylum seekers and refugees from the south and from war torn countries such as Syria. First, we have to agree that as people of faith there is something that we can all do. Second, we have to hold this time in our country's history, and in our parish history in prayer. Thirdly, we can be moved to act to support agencies involved in refugee care and protection, especially Christian agencies and parishes on the front lines.

First, how do we hear God's call? Next month we will start formulating the annual Stewardship Plan for the parish. It will involve more than the annual pledge drive in November. A core part of the plan is articulating a vision for the Church of St Luke and St Matthew. How are we as a parish to live out God's call for us to build the kingdom of God on earth? How are we to do this in our local community and in the wider world? Acting to reduce injustice is a good place to start.

Second, prayer is as you have heard me say a critical part of our spiritual life. It is the foundation of our spiritual life because it connects us to God, from whom we seek guidance as to how to grow as a spiritual and prayerful community. Persistent prayer and prayer seeking guidance in how to provide financial and human resources will allow us to enact the tasks required to continue to build the kingdom of God.

Third, as part of our Stewardship Plan we will seek to identify agencies and parishes on the front lines of this crisis of human migration that we can partner with by developing relationships to understand need, communal prayer to seek God's guidance and blessing and financial support to make the wheels of justice turn forward.

God is continuing to work in history through us and through God's revelatory acts. God has blessed us and asks us to share these blessings with others. We can't drag our feet or be weighed down with fear that sharing will deprive us of the resources we need to survive. The kingdom of God is being built now and we are called to rise to meet the need.

Abraham and Sarah never saw the results of their faith filled answer to God's call to migrate to a better country and procreate to gift a new population of heirs to God's promise. Through faith they went.

St Hildegard of Bingen explains, "A human being is a vessel that God has built for himself and filled with his inspiration so that his works are perfected in it." We are called to listen for God's voice, discern its meaning and then step out in faith, hope, courage and obedience. St Hildegard says that such faithful trust "shows the way," so that, "with the passion of heavenly yearning, we all produce rich fruit."

Amen