

People Without a Country
Revelation 21:10, 22 - 22:5
Acts 16:9-15
May 16, 2010
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Last week Jim and I were at Roy and Debra Steele's wedding, and we sat with a man named Mohammed. He told us a little about his life and said I could share the story with you. Mohammed is from the country of Yemen. His family was poor and needed work. They crossed the border into Saudi Arabia where there were jobs. His father worked hard, and Mohammed did well in school. He applied for a scholarship to come to the United States as a college student. He was accepted at the Dominican College in San Rafael. There he met his wife-to-be. They were married and then went together to Yemen to meet the extended family. Mohammed's student visa ran out, and he could not come back into the United States. The couple was young and they hadn't thought all this out. So the wife came back to America and waited for 2 years while her husband secured permission to reenter the U. S. When Mohammed was finally allowed to come to America, he became a naturalized citizen. Now they have a family and good jobs and are doing well.

I asked Mohammed about his thoughts on immigration, a controversial topic today. He said he could see both the conservative and the liberal sides of the issue because he had experienced both sides—he and his parents were illegal immigrants from Yemen to Saudi Arabia. They wished they could have lived there legally, but that was impossible. The Saudi people needed Yemeni workers to do the low-level jobs, and the Yemeni people were willing to work for low wages. Now Mohammed sees undocumented Mexican workers who are needed in this country and wishes they could be here legally. But he also sees immigration from the perspective of one who came to this country *legally*. He applied and waited and feels somewhat resentful of those who have come over the border *illegally*. He can see the immigration issue from both sides.

It's a complicated issue. Probably most of us can agree that we need immigration reform. In a sense we have at our southern border 2 signs: one that says "No Trespassing" and one that says "Help Wanted." We have not been able to enforce our border security, nor have we been able to create a pathway to citizenship for the undocumented immigrants who are here. A new Arizona law will go into effect this summer, that is, unless it is deemed unconstitutional. This law requires police officers to check a person's immigration status if there is "reasonable suspicion" that the person is in the U. S. illegally. Last week we learned that Arizona is now going to ban ethnic studies programs in Arizona schools. And in the news we have been reminded that Arizona was one of 2 states that did not for some

time recognize Martin Luther King's birthday. One student of ethics put this all together and said: "A pattern clearly seems to be emerging...*You* are not part of *us* and we want to keep it that way. We'll keep it that way by not celebrating your heroes. We'll keep it that way by keeping you in fear during your daily activities. And we'll keep it that way by making sure you are taught *our* history in *our* way so that you become an 'individual' and not a part of your family's ethnic heritage" (**Jimmy McCarty** is a doctoral student at Emory University studying Religion, Ethics, and Society, <http://blog.sojo.net/2010/05/12/arizonas-questionable-track-record-on-race-mlk-day-banning-ethnic-studies-and-regulating-accents/>).

This is a finger-pointing kind of attitude: "You" are different. The one good thing about the new Arizona immigration law is that it may push the nation to deal with immigration reform more quickly. In the meantime, it is polarizing people, instilling in people fear, and encouraging racial profiling.

Our scripture talks about "the healing of the nations." In John's vision in Revelation, there are 2 trees on either side of the river. Imagine this river as the Rio Grande: a tree of life in Mexico and a tree of life in the United States. And the leaves on both trees "are for the healing of the nations" (22:2) says our Bible.

We have immigrants in the United States from all around the world. Each person has a different story about leaving a home country and coming into a new country. Leila Lalas has agreed to share with us her story of immigration....

Witness Speaker: Leila Lalas, from the Philippines

Another group of people without a country are refugees. A refugee is one who flees from a country to escape danger or persecution. Our daughter Leslie is working with refugees in Kansas City as a volunteer social worker. She has shared with me stories of two women she is helping. Their names are Moo Meh of Burma and Habibi of Iraq.

Moo Meh is from the state of Karenni in Burma, or Myanmar, where there is civil war and ethnic cleansing of minority people. The Karenni people are some of the poorest and most persecuted people in the world. Moo Meh is 45 years old and is about to have her 6th child. Because she is a refugee, she is here legally and has some help from a caseworker at Catholic Charities. She speaks no English, is very shy and seems depressed. She may have lived in a refugee camp for years in Thailand, where thousands of Karenni people have fled to escape massive killings. When Leslie met Moo Meh, the family was living in a house with interior walls covered in mold. There was almost no food. Leslie helped the family move to another place and get something to eat. The caseworker is now getting them food stamps and Medicaid and WIC, and showing them how to apply for jobs and pay the rent and utility

bills. This is all new to them. Everything is strange. Moo Meh appears to be wise, but her wisdom is all from an entirely different cultural context, and in the inner city of Kansas City, life is very confusing and frightening. Moo Meh is just thankful that she is alive. She is here to save her children. No one speaks her language—she only speaks Karenni—so she depends on her children to pick up English and translate for her.

Habibi is from Iraq. Her brother-in-law was killed there, and her husband fled to Sweden. She applied to come to the United States with her children, and she was relocated to Kansas City. One of her children is autistic. Habibi is extremely isolated as his sole caregiver. She cries a lot, but she is also grateful to be safe and to have her son receiving medical care. She is enrolled in English classes and she is surviving. She hopes other family members will join her. There are some jobs in Kansas City that refugees have taken, moving packages with UPS or working at the pig slaughterhouse, even though as a Muslim, one shouldn't kill swine. These jobs at least don't require English proficiency.

Moo Meh and Habibi had no country when they waited in refugee camps. Now they are here in hopes that their children will be American citizens and have a decent life.

A professor at Iliff School of Theology, Dr. Dana Wilbanks, outlines three biblical mandates regarding the treatment of people without a country, whether they cross our borders legally or illegally. The first teaching of the Bible is that all persons are created in the image of God. We must regard personhood as sacred. The second teaching is that we must advocate for the most vulnerable of our society and world. Those without a country, those without a job, those without education and medical care should be our concern. And the third teaching is that we must extend hospitality to the stranger. This does not dictate a particular immigration policy, but it does demand an attitude of respect for those among us who are different ("A Mainline Christian Voice," in *Trails of Hope and Terror: Testimonies of Immigration*, 144-147).

Seeing people from other countries as children of God, providing for their basic needs, and learning to welcome and appreciate their differentness—these are movements toward what Jesus called the kingdom or reign of God.

Paul and Silas met with people worshiping by a river. They had crossed over to Macedonia; they were Jews and, in crossing the river, there they found Greeks. And Lydia, a woman from Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth, opened her heart and listened to Paul. She and her family were baptized, and she invited the visitors to come and stay in her home. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, ...for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Lydia provided for these strangers a place at the table. At the Academy of Art in San Francisco, art students are creating dining-room tables for newly arrived refugees who are settling in Oakland. This is a joint project: St. Vincent de Paul donates panels of wood, the Academy of Art students create the wood into unique tables, and the International Rescue Committee identifies the families who need the dining-room furniture (9 May, 2010, *Contra Costa Times*). This is one way to welcome the stranger.

There is a movement in some religious advocacy groups to change the definition of "refugee" to be not only a person who flees a country for political reasons, but also for economic reasons. This would really open the gate, as most immigrants come to this country for economic opportunity. Many are desperate. Of course, we cannot expect to take in every person who needs a country. This is an international problem, one that we need to grapple with as a world community "for the healing of the nations."

"In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north; just one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth."

Lord Jesus, help us to recognize you in the face of the stranger and welcome your presence among us. You have graced us with the gifts of many cultures and nations. Free us from the fear of those from other lands. Teach us to share our gifts with newcomers in return, so that you may say, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me. Come now into my kingdom." We ask this in your name. Amen.

Prayer for Immigrant Refugees, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003