

Ruth 1

Becoming Immigrants

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*Imagine there is a knock on your door and when you answer it, someone you love and trust is there says, “We have to go...now. If we stay here, we won’t survive.” Maybe it’s because there is no more food. Maybe it’s because it would be dangerous. Whatever the reason, you believe the person at the door. You have to go. You grab the only thing you can carry with you. An old backpack.

*What would you put in it?

What would you wear?

What are the things you would be the most disappointed to leave behind?

*The story begins, “...there was a famine in the land.” In the biblical narrative, people frequently found themselves on the move for a variety of reasons, but certainly one of them was lack of food. This kind of scenario didn’t end with the stories in the Bible. Human beings have, at different times and places, been forced to leave their homes in order to survive.

*For example, in Ireland, beginning in 1845, a disease spread through the potato crop. The infestation ruined up to one-half of the potato crop that year, and about three-quarters of the crop over the next seven years. Because the tenant farmers of Ireland—then ruled as a colony of Great Britain—relied heavily on the potato as a source of food, the infestation had a catastrophic impact on Ireland and its population. Before it ended in 1852, the Potato Famine resulted in the death of roughly one million Irish from starvation and related causes, with at least another million forced to leave their homeland as

refugees. Many of the refugees found their new home in various cities throughout North America.

<https://www.history.com/topics/immigration/irish-potato-famine>

*In the 1930s, in the midst of the Great Depression, a number of things came together resulting in disaster and great suffering. Drought conditions in the Southern Plains, along with land mismanagement by farmers, caused by a high demand for wheat production, combined with strong winds, leading to what we call the Dust Bowl.

Crops failed, livestock and people died, and farmers lost everything, including their family homes. Hunger, poverty, and the lack of opportunity drove many farming families on a desperate migration toward California, seemingly their only hope for a future. According to one report from the University of California-Davis, 2.5 million people left the plain states and headed west.

(<https://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/more.php?id=1355>)

In addition to famine and economic disaster, there are other reasons people migrate from their homes. One of them is war. When missiles and tanks destroy entire cities, residents have no choice but to leave their homes. This week we were reminded that our siblings in Syria continue to suffer due to the ongoing violence of war. According to news sources, “Turkey’s escalating offensive in Syria could displace as many as 300,000 people and cut off their access to humanitarian services — creating yet another refugee crisis in the war-torn country just as the U.S. is slashing the number of refugees it will admit.” Since March 2011, the beginning of the ongoing civil war, about 6.6 million refugees have fled the country and another 6.1 million remain in Syria, but have been internally displaced. (<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/10/11/20908160/turkey-invasion-syria-refugee-crisis-trump>)

And thousands of miles away, citizens in countries like El Salvador and Honduras are leaving their homes to escape gang violence, extortion, kidnapping threats, and death threats. “The region’s civil wars left behind tens of thousands of young people from broken families. That reality, combined with extreme inequality, policies of mass incarceration of suspicious youth, and weak judicial and security institutions, have created the perfect storm. Over the past 15 years, gangs have taken over both rural and urban areas across Central America, setting up roadblocks in poor neighborhoods and imposing their own law.” While poverty, also due to war, remains the principal cause of Central American families traveling north, desperation to escape gang violence also persuades many families to migrate. (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/06/central-america-border-immigration/563744/>)

*The point I am trying to make with these examples is, migration, people moving from one place to another, has been and is part of our human experience. And for the most part, throughout history and presently, the people doing the migrating are without another viable option. Move or stay where you are and die or at the very least, suffer. Not much of a choice. That’s the story of the book of Ruth. This tale, which is light-hearted and sarcastic later in the story, begins in disaster, with a famine. This was a storyline the original readers understood. Famine, sadly, was a part of their world. What would have been really hard for them to wrap their minds around, and maybe would have even been seen as absurdly funny, was the idea that this family would have fled to *Moab*. Moab was not a place that one fled to, it was a place from which to flee. The biblical tradition regarded the Moabites as shameful, inhospitable, and even dangerous.

That’s where our story begins. And today’s text ends with three vulnerable women, three dead husbands, and no means of support. They literally were left with nothing, including hope, if they stayed

where they were, three women without a man. It was a woman's attachment to a man that gave her security. Their only choice was to go to Naomi's place of origin, Bethlehem, which ironically means, "house of bread," in Hebrew. There was food in Bethlehem. There was also extended family, which included a man.

Not a bad plan, right? Especially for Naomi, but what about Orpah and Ruth? They were Moabites. They would be strangers, maybe even considered hostile strangers, in a strange land. What should they do? What was best for them? Naomi, understanding the challenges they would face, insisted her daughters-in-law go back to their families of origin. Orpah and Ruth, even as they were grieving their own losses, wanted to care for Naomi. At last, though, Orpah made the decision to return to her family. The women kiss, embrace, and Orpah left. And with that, we don't usually talk any more about Orpah.

I want us to realize, though, that Orpah and Ruth were motivated by the same thing. The Hebrew word for their motivation is *hesed*. Both women acted out of deep, committed love and faithfulness, *hesed*, toward Naomi. Naomi told them to leave her and go back to their mothers' houses. Orpah out of *hesed*, did what her mother-in-law told her to do, even though it was excruciatingly painful. She said good-bye to someone she loved, someone who was more vulnerable than she. In contrast, Ruth was faithful to her mother-in-law by resisting Naomi's order. It is in the *hesed* of these women that we find God in this story. You see, God is not in thunder and lightning at the top of a mountain and God is not a voice from a burning bush. God is in the love the women share with one another.

Before we leave Orpah for good, I think it's worthwhile to mention that Orpah's part in the story has something to teach us with regard to forced migration. Her character reminds us that leaving one's home, no matter how desperate the situation, is not a decision to be taken

lightly. Orpah had another option and chose what was best for her, she chose what Naomi said was best for her. Despite the narrative being offered by some today, people do not leave their homes and take off on a dangerous journey to a strange land unless it is the only way to survive, unless it is the only hope they have. This is the truth.

Right now in our country, we are faced with challenges that are the result of human beings having no choice but to leave their homes. Can you get in touch with the feeling of leaving your home with the backpack? Think about how you would feel as you take your last look at what you would leave behind. Immigrants and refugees have those feelings when they walk away from their homes. They say good-bye to their elderly parents who can't travel, knowing it is unlikely they will ever see them again. They say good-bye to their pets, leaving them to fend for themselves or to wonder where "their person" is going. They leave their wedding pictures and their child's kindergarten artwork. They leave their Christmas ornaments, their family's menorah, their Quran or prayer book. They leave it all to get to safety, knowing the path ahead will be anything but safe.

This week's edition of the Christian Century magazine included a story written by Matt Gaventa, the minister of University Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas. Gaventa recently traveled to the southern border. He went to the border, joining other Texas clergy for a weekend of intense, onsite education. The group met in Matamoros, MX. This is part of his story:

*"I am standing underneath the only shade tree in sight, the first one you get to once you cross the border, a stone's throw from the international bridge that spans the Rio Grande between Brownsville, TX, and Matamoros, MX. Nobody in south Texas stands outside at three o'clock in the afternoon in August, not even under a shade tree. But here in Matamoros, this tree's shade is home to a whole village: a tent city planted by the streams of concrete. Hundreds of migrants who

have fled violence and persecution wind up here, unable to cross the bridge and unable to return home, with only one good shade tree for protection.

My Spanish is limited, but through an interpreter, I hear their stories. One family has come from El Salvador, another from the Dominican Republic, another from Guatemala. None of them has come seeking fame and fortune---only safety. A mother watched her son die at the hands of a drug cartel: she came north with her remaining children. A father brought his family after refusing to pay protection fees to the local mob. I have been instructed not to post any photographs on social media that could aid any cartel hoping to track any of these folks down. All of them are in danger, and none of them can go home.

They can't stay here either, at least not indefinitely. Cartels are also at the border, preying on anyone who shows up with cash or valuables, and extorting extravagant fees for desperate trips across the river.

Whatever money these families had when they left home has been fully depleted. Now they can't even afford the pay toilet inside the Mexican border office..."

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/first-person/visiting-tent-city-mexico-created-trump-s-migrant-protection-protocol>

*I ask you to stop and consider how you would feel as you imagine walking away from your home and I share part of Gaventa's story to help us see the people waiting outside in the elements at the border, the people detained in crowded detention centers, the people traveling on top of a train called The Beast, to see them all as people, just like us. And like the three women in the story in the book of Ruth, *hesed* is their only hope. We must act with *hesed* to ease their suffering.

*Deuteronomy 10:19

You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

*Leviticus 19:33-34

“The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

*Leviticus 27:19

“Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow.”

*Psalm 146:9

“The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.”

*Matthew 25:35

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

*Matthew 25:40

“What you do to the least of my [siblings] you do unto me.”

*Romans 12:13

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

*Hebrews 13:1-3

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

I could go on and on. Our treatment of stranger is something the Bible talks about a lot. There is no doubt that the biblical authors believed God called God’s people to care for immigrants and refugees.

*As Christians, we must resist the temptation to allow narratives of fear and scarcity to be heard over God's narrative of *hesed*.

God loves all people. The suffering that immigrants and refugees all over the world are enduring at the hands of other people, while others do nothing, is sinful. It is sin. It is our corporate sin and we must repent. In case you are wondering, I said the same thing when Bill Clinton was president, when George W. Bush was president, when Barack Obama was president and I am saying it now under this current administration. This is not a partisan issue. This is a human rights and moral issue, and for Christians, this is an issue of faith. We cannot claim to follow Jesus and support policies that cause and allow the suffering and death of immigrants and refugees. The two are fundamentally at odds. I know I have said this before, but the plight of our immigrant and refugee brothers and sisters is getting worse and not better.

So, what can we do? How can we show *hesed* for our siblings who are immigrants and refugees? First, and most importantly, we have to call our senators and representatives and tell them that the way in which we are treating immigrants and refugees is not acceptable. Insist they work with their colleagues for humane, compassionate solutions. They exist, but it will take people with many different perspectives to find them. We must be the squeaky wheels, insisting the hard work of compromise and truth-telling is done. And second, we have to stop allowing the narrative of fear and scarcity to dominate our social circles, our work environments, our neighborhoods, and maybe even our own families. Immigrants and refugees come seeking safety, seeking a home. They do not come to hurt us. There is enough for all of us.

There is enough. This is the crux of Eric Law's book, *Holy Currencies: 6 Blessings for Sustainable Missional Ministries* which some of us continue to read and discuss in this season of stewardship. Law encourages us to look beyond money as our only currency and see

value in our relationships, truthfulness, time and place, gifts of leadership, and wellness. Specifically, he defines wellness for churches and other communities in terms of balance. Do we, as a community, have healthy cycles of work and rest? Do we focus on what our neighbors need to be healthy as much as we focus on our own needs? Do we recognize that wellness isn't just about physical needs, but includes spiritual, mental, and emotional safety as well?

Our text today tells a story of three women who did not have any of the things we would identify as basic needs; their lives were not a picture of wellness by any stretch of the imagination. They didn't have a man, a way of supporting themselves, the means to provide shelter for themselves or food for the table. They were not safe. They were grieving and empty. Naomi's words sum it up, "...the hand of the Lord has turned against me." If we were to see the story to its end, though, we would learn that Naomi and Ruth end up not just okay, but they end up full. Full of food, full of hope, full of life again. Ruth, a refugee from a hostile land was the recipient of God's *hesed* in the person of Boaz, and in him, she found her home. Through his steadfast love and kindness, life goes on in the form of a little boy named Obed. May we, in this time and place, be the carriers of God's *hesed* to all the people God loves who are today, right now, hoping and searching for home. Will you pray with me?

Hospitable God,
who teaches us to welcome the stranger;
we pray for all refugees and immigrants:
the ones who have been displaced
through famine,
the ones who have been displaced
through climate change,
the ones who have been displaced
through war and oppression.

Enable us to offer practical assistance
in terms of shelter, food and clothing.
May we demonstrate compassion
so that refugees and immigrants
can be welcomed as treasured guests.
Amen.