

The following is a work in progress by the Rev. Joan M. Maruskin, National Administrator of the Church World Service Religious Services Program. Parts have been presented in churches and national conferences since 1994. Use by individuals and by congregational, denominational and ecumenical groups is allowed. May not be republished without written permission. Please contact Joan Maruskin at 202-544-2350 Ext. 22, or email jmaruskin@ycccchurches.org with questions or for more information.

The Bible as the Ultimate Immigration Handbook: Written by, for, and about migrants, immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers

The Bible begins with the migration of God's Spirit and ends with John in exile on the Isle of Patmos. Between those two events, the uprooted people of God seek safety, sanctuary, and refuge, and the living God gives directions for welcoming the stranger.

In the beginning, all was darkness and void, and the spirit of God moved (migrated) over the face of the chaos (**Genesis 1:1**). To move is to migrate. The biblical story is a migration story. The Bible begins with God's spirit migrating over the face of the water, followed by God, who, after creating the birds, fish, and animals (all of which migrate), moved throughout creation looking for a caretaker for this world. Not finding one, God said, "Let us create humankind, male and female, in our own image..." (**Genesis 1:26**). God did just that and created Adam and Eve in God's own image and gave them dominion over all the earth and told them to multiply and fill the earth. To do that, it was necessary for them to begin the human migration story. That story is told throughout the Bible and continues to this day in the movement of the migrating pilgrim people of God, who continue to move, to multiply, and to maintain the earth.

We are all part of God's great plan of migration. The great majority of people have either lived out the migration story or can trace their roots back to ancestors traveling from one land to another. In fact, if we embrace Adam and Eve as our original ancestors, we are all migrants in a strange land and very far from home. Take a moment and consider your personal migration. Are you where you were born? Have you moved, and, if so, for what reason? How many times have you moved? Many of us move by choice, others by necessity, and others by force. Humankind's story is a migration story. We all are, or have been migrants, immigrants, refugees, or asylum seekers. As believers in the God of Abraham, we trace our roots back to the Garden of Eden located in the area of four rivers: Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates. Although the exact location of the garden is not known geographically, we can surmise location from the full text that says the Gihon flows around the land of Cush (which is now known as Ethiopia) and the Tigris is east of Assyria and the other is the Euphrates. Using biblical data, the Garden of Eden can be surmised to be located in either Ethiopia or modern-day Iraq. Those of us who live in the Western World are a long way from home and living in lands that were not even known to exist in biblical times. Adam and Eve have migrated a very long way.

The Creator God brought Adam and Eve into being. There are two creation stories in the Bible. The first is the full chapter of **Genesis 1-2:3**, in which God creates the

world and all things in it in six days. God states that it is very good and rests on the seventh day. In **Genesis 2:4-25**, God first creates Adam and then Eve and gives instructions on living in the Garden. Adam and Eve do not follow God's directions and, because of their disobedience, they are eventually exiled (**Genesis 3:22-24**), but not before God sews skins together to cover them and protect them from the elements. God's concern for the strangers moving throughout the world begins at this point and continues throughout the Bible.

Welcoming the stranger is the central theme of biblical hospitality. It is an inclusive hospitality that always makes room for the stranger. It also shows that no person is to be excluded. The first example of inclusive hospitality is seen when Adam and Eve's son Cain kills his brother, Abel (**Genesis 4:8-16**). As punishment, God makes him a wanderer on the earth. But before sending him away, God puts a mark of protection on Cain – so that no one will kill him. The criminal migrant was protected so he would not be harmed in his wanderings.

(Today very few migrants [criminals or not] are protected. If they are undocumented, they are arrested and deported. Asylum seekers, who have been persecuted in their homelands, are routinely placed in immigration detention and must defend themselves or seek legal help from behind bars.)

As humans multiplied, the population of the earth continued to increase until it became corrupt and filled with violence. God's plan included a great flood that would wipe out all of humanity except for one small remnant. At over five hundred years of age, Noah was chosen to continue the human race. With the help of his wife, sons, and their wives, he built the ark and filled it with two of each kind of living creature (**Genesis 6:5–8:22**). The "Noahs" were forced to flee their land because of the great flood, which was probably the greatest natural disaster in the course of human history, perhaps even greater than the tsunami in 2004 and the hurricanes of 2005. These events are considered to have been of biblical proportions and to have happened in areas with much denser populations than those of ancient biblical history, when the world was still being populated, so therefore may have resulted in much higher loss of life.

Noah and his family became migrants without a known destination. Eventually their ark landed several thousand miles from Ellis Island, and the inhabitants were blessed by God and told, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (**Genesis 9:1b**). Later, scripture tells us that from the three sons of Noah – Shem, Ham, and Japheth – and their wives, the whole earth was populated (**Genesis 9:19**).

(It is important to note that, in today's world, victims of a natural disaster are not considered eligible for refugee resettlement. Many of them spend the rest of their lives stranded in a strange country or displaced in their homelands. This happened to thousands of displaced persons from the Gulf Coast of the United States and to the victims of the earthquake in Pakistan in 2005.)

Genesis 10 gives an accounting of the migration of Noah's sons and their descendants as "from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood." Note there was freedom of movement. As the Church of the Brethren teaches: "God made people – people made borders."

(It is theorized that if people were free to migrate anywhere in the world, the world's population would balance out and everyone would be able to meet their physical needs in God's economy. Much of the world is starving; however, the world would be able to sustain us all if the products and produce of the world were shared more equitably. Part of inclusive hospitality is being willing to share what we have with those who have not.)

The whole earth spoke one language as the family of Noah migrated (**Genesis 11**). As they had a common language, they built a tower to the heavens. This did not please God, who "scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth...Therefore it was called Babel." The migration story continued with multiple languages developing as the people moved and cultures were created.

(It also causes one to wonder about the wisdom of those calling for English only in the United States. The first explorers brought Spanish into the New World, which was already inhabited by indigenous Native Americans with many languages. In addition, the Southwestern states all were originally part of Mexico, so Spanish is the first language of those states. English is the second western language that was spoken in this country and although the primary language, it is enhanced by numerous other languages, which enhance the linguistic traditions of the USA.)

The generations continued on the earth, and the biblical story picked up with Terah (the father of Abram), Abram, his wife Sarai, and his brother's son Lot settling in Haran. It is there that God spoke to Abram and said, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (**Genesis 12:1**). Abram, Sarai, and Lot became migrants going into and out of Canaan, to the hill country on the east of Bethel. They then journeyed toward the Negreb and because of famine went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien – a stranger (**Genesis 12:10**). They came out of Egypt and eventually separated, with Lot settling near Sodom on the plain of the Jordan and Abram settling by the oaks of Mamre in Hebron (**Genesis 13**).

(The God of Abram instructed him to migrate just as today, the voice of God continues to direct people to paths of migration and immigration. Within any faith-based group, many people can be found who have embarked on a faith journey taking them to strange lands because they heard God calling them to migrate to a new job or specific ministry.)

In **Genesis 14**, we see the first of many, many biblical battles. In the war, Lot is first taken captive and forced to leave his land. Eventually, Abram rescued him and he

was able to return. It is important to remember that whenever there is a war, there will be refugees and internally displaced persons. War NEVER takes place without both of those populations coming into being as a result of the violence. Although this text will not go into depth in describing the biblical wars, the victims, and the results, note: Wherever there is a war, people are uprooted and there are migration stories, refugee stories, and asylum stories.

(Note also that, in biblical times, as in previous centuries, the majority of victims of wars were the warriors. In the 20th and 21st century, the majority of victims are civilians and the majority of civilians are women and children. Eighty [80] percent of the world's refugees are women and children. Estimates have the women and children killed in conflicts that are presently taking place in 2005 being as high as 90 percent of the victims. They are often referred to as collateral damage.)

In **Genesis 15**, God told Abram of his role in the migration story. It is stated, “Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years” (**Genesis 15:13**). God continued by telling Abram that his offspring would come back to the land of Abram in four generations.

The story continues in Abram and Sarai's desire for children. At Sarai's insistence, Hagar, the Egyptian slave-girl, the foreigner, bears Abram a child, Ishmael. Eventually they are exiled into the wilderness and God promises to make Ishmael a great nation – the same promise given later to Isaac (**Genesis 21**).

(Ishmael's offspring become the Muslims and populate much of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, and spread across the world. It is important to remember the geographical location of biblical history and to look at the ethnicity of the patriarchs and matriarchs, who are the foundation of the Christian faith. They were Middle Easterners and their descendants are presently being targeted and imprisoned because of their ethnicity.)

After the birth of Ishmael and prior to the birth of Isaac, God renames Abram and calls him Abraham and Sarai become Sarah. We are then exposed to the biblical mandate to care for the stranger, as one never knows when the stranger might be God. In **Genesis 18:1-8**, God appears to Abraham as three strangers near the oaks at Mamre. He offers the three men – the strangers – hospitality. He refers to them as “my Lord” and offers them the best of what he has. This is the first biblical description of ideal inclusive hospitality – of giving the very best to strangers – who in this case turned out to be God.

The biblical concept of hospitality is based in offering hospitality to the stranger, the sojourner, the alien, the migrant, and the foreigner. It can be verified in **Deuteronomy 6**, which speaks of being brought into a new land by the Lord. This

and many other passages in Deuteronomy, which will be included later, stress the importance of being one with the strangers in the land.

(The biblical concept of hospitality is hospitality to the stranger. Entertaining friends and relatives is a different type of contemporary hospitality. As disciples of the Christ, it is important to ask ourselves how many strangers have felt our hospitality. How are we welcoming the stranger?)

The importance of this concept of hospitality is seen in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot welcomed the angels, but the townspeople did not. Their lack of hospitality to the stranger brought about their destruction. "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy" (**Ezekiel 16:49**). This story not only points to **Matthew 25** in the New Testament but also shows the importance of listening to God and moving when told to move – without looking back. Lot's wife looked back and became a pillar of salt.

The refugee story is one of not being able to look back, because there is often only death and destruction behind. The refugee seeks refuge and safety and sanctuary. Those of us in safer lands are mandated and blessed to welcome them with open arms. Welcoming refugees, migrants, immigrants, and/or asylum seekers is an example of inclusive hospitality.

(Building a fence around the borders of this country to keep out the strangers in need has not/will not stopped migration. Instead, the fence has kept out Christ and the blessings we would receive by welcoming the strangers.)

The biblical migration story continued with famine, causing Isaac to settle in the land of Gerar as an alien (**Genesis 26:2**). Then it picked up with Jacob traveling to another land for a wife. Later he was forced to flee because of his brother's violence. God directed him to Bethel. We eventually learn that Jacob settled in "the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan" (**Genesis 37:1**). Slavery and trafficking are seen when Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, and was transported to Egypt.

(Slavery continues to this day under the guise of trafficking. Men, women, and children are trafficked and brought into the U.S. and countries around the world, and forced into hard labor, domestic service, and sexual slavery.)

Joseph overcame the circumstances that forced him into slavery. The captive slave rose to power as an integral part of the Egyptian government. He had an opportunity to retaliate for having been sold into slavery, when famine caused mass hunger in his homeland and his brothers came to Egypt seeking grain. Instead of striking back, Joseph followed God's mandate to care for strangers by offering inclusive hospitality and welcomed them, as though they were strangers (in fact, he pretended that they were strangers), gave them grain, and sent them back. The

circle was eventually completed when Joseph's father and brothers, their families, flocks, and all they possessed left Canaan and migrated to Goshen, where there was food and Joseph welcomed them (**Genesis 37-47**).

(Neither famine nor starvation are grounds for asylum, refugee status, or immigration. United States immigration laws do not allow persons to enter this country simply because they are starving and need to feed their families. This economy needs the migrant workers, who come to feed their families, but it forces them to live undocumented lives, and to work in sub-standard conditions.)

The book of **Exodus**, the story of the Exodus – is the story of the movement of the people of God away from slavery and injustice to freedom and new life. It is perhaps the world's greatest and best-known migration story. Exodus began with the Hebrews being oppressed by their taskmasters. Their persecution was increased with the orders of the King of Egypt to have all newborn Hebrew boys killed. However, one was protected and hidden until he was three months old, at which time he was placed in a basket in the river. In today's language he would be referred to as an "Unaccompanied Alien Child." The child was rescued from the river by Pharaoh's daughter, who chose to ignore her father's orders to kill all male infants. She named him Moses, and raised him in Pharaoh's palace.

(Unaccompanied children picked up at a U.S. border, unless immediately returned to their country of origin, are placed in juvenile detention facilities. If they are very lucky, they are placed in foster care until a decision about their immigration status is reached.)

Moses grew up to witness the oppressive treatment of the Hebrews by the Egyptians. In responding to this injustice, he killed an Egyptian, and became a criminal alien, who fled for his life to a strange land. He was taken in and given sanctuary in Midian.

(Today, in the U.S., he would be put in prison, serve his sentence, and eventually be deported back to Egypt, to be imprisoned there if that country would accept him. If it would not, he would spend the rest of his life in prison in the United States.)

In Midian, Moses married Zipporah and was eventually called by God to return to Egypt because, in God's words, "The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." Moses wonders how he could possibly do this and God replied, "I will be with you" (**Exodus 3:1- 3:12**). The key phrase was "I will be with you." In the Exodus, God migrated with the Hebrews.

(God is a migrant moving with the people! Throughout the Book of Exodus, God traveled with the people and continues to travel with the migrants today.)

Moses, returned to Egypt, and facilitated the Hebrew Exodus through a series of plagues and dialogues with Pharaoh meant to bring about the release of his people. When the Hebrews were finally permitted to leave, they left as most refugees leave, with not enough time to pack, but with God leading them. As with all refugees, the Hebrews had to leave abruptly and leave forever, heading to an unknown but promised land.

(Ask yourself, what would you pack if you had less than 15 minutes to pack to leave your home forever? This is a decision that modern-day refugees are repeatedly forced to make. The Hebrews left, but their actual status could be debated. They were forced to work in impossible conditions, their pay was not a living wage, and they had harsh task masters; however, if their treatment did not rise to the level of persecution, they would not be considered refugees, but rather migrants looking for work and homes to support themselves and their children.)

In **Exodus 14:7** we read, “When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines...God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea...The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day.... and a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, that they might travel by day and night. Neither ...left its place in front of the people.” God migrated with the people. God was, is, and always will be a migrant, migrating with the migrants of the world, seeking to protect them and find safe haven for them. And it is important to remember that this migration pattern also included care of the refugees. God provided manna and water and all they needed to survive.

(A compass might have taken a few years off the 40-year journey, which if done today using a map is an 11-day walk.)

Eventually the Hebrews reached Canaan and prepared to enter the Promised Land. They entered the Promised Land and the Canaanites had their land taken away from them, became refugees and internally displaced persons, and were made to do forced labor. The joy of the Hebrews resulted from the destruction and displacement of the Canaanites. There cannot be victors without victims.

(Details can be found in Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. An example that is even closer to home is the knowledge that the indigenous people of North America, the Native Americans, were decimated from disease and violence and placed on reservations. Their homeland was taken away from them, so others could claim it as their promised land.)

Along with the details of entering the Promised Land, the Bible also contains advice on how the people are to act once they are in that land, and one of the first instructions is found in **Deuteronomy 10:17-19**, “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 food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

(Do we show impartiality in our present immigration laws? If not, why not? How many churches have ministries of hospitality to the strangers, the aliens, the sojourners? Repeatedly the mandate from God in the Hebrew Bible is to care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. Although it is not at all unusual for churches to have ministries to widows and orphans, it is rather rare for churches to have ministries to the strangers in the land. Ask the people of your church, “What three groups of people does God mandate that we care for in the Hebrew Bible?” See how many get all three groups right.)

Deuteronomy includes numerous statements of how God’s people are to care for the alien in the land. In **Deuteronomy 14:19**, we read, “The Levite, because he has no portion of inheritance among you, and the alien, the orphan and the widow who are in your town, shall come and eat and be satisfied, in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do.”

(Our blessings from God are directly dependent on our welcoming the stranger. God blesses us with grace and God expects us to respond to the blessings we are given by blessing others.)

Additional passages in **Deuteronomy** are:

- **23:7**, “You shall not detest an Edomite, for he is your brother; you shall not detest an Egyptian, because you were an alien in his land.”
- **24:17**, “You shall not pervert the justice due an alien or an orphan, nor take a widow’s garment in pledge.”
- **25:19**, “When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.”

All of **Deuteronomy 26** is important, as it shows the relationship between each and every person’s ancestry and the responsibility that is placed on the people of God to care for the alien. One example is **Deuteronomy 26:5b**, which reads, “A wandering Aremean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien....” We are reminded that we all spring from wanderers on the earth.

(How would your statement read? A wandering _____ was my ancestor. What nationality or ethnicity would you put in the blank? How far back can you trace your roots?)

That same chapter, in **26:11**, continues, you shall set down the first of the fruit of the ground and bow before the Lord. “Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and your house.” The chapter continues to express the importance of caring for others and in **26:12**, during the third year, which is the year of the tithe;

it is to be given “to the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows.” The sacred portion is given to these groups at God’s command.

(Once again the mandate is affirmed and it foreshadows the New Testament mandate to care for the neediest.)

In fact, care of the alien is so important that **Deuteronomy 27:19** states, “Cursed is he who distorts the justice due an alien, orphan, and widow. And all the people shall say Amen.

(There is a translation that reads, “Cursed is the nation....” Perhaps this is a prophetic warning for governments to consider closely.)

Along with Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Bible giving guidance for treating refugees, we also find advice in Psalms. It is important to note that refugees will often refer to the Psalms that they read and recited to themselves as they were fleeing and seeking a safe haven. One that is used very often is **Psalm 91**, which begins: “You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.” For God will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge...”

As well as giving hope to the uprooted people of the world since biblical times, the Psalms also define the refugee experience. This is best seen in **Psalm 137**: “By the rivers of Babylon – we sat down there and we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”

(This remains the question for all persons who are uprooted in this century. How can they sing a foreign land, especially one that does not welcome them and in fact seeks to expel them and treat them as less than second class citizens?)

The story of uprooted people continues throughout the Hebrew Bible as the Hebrews claim the Promised Land and are eventually sent into exile and later return. This pattern can be followed in Kings, Chronicles, Esther, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Amos.

In 605 BC, Daniel and his three friends were captured by Nebuchadnezzar and taken to Babylon. Eventually the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah were also in exile. It is while in exile that Isaiah prophesies the coming of the Christ. See **Isaiah 40-55**. In **Isaiah 40:3** we read, “A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” In addition in **Isaiah 61: 1-2a** we read the words that are on the scroll that Jesus reads when he first stands up

to read in the synagogue to formally begin his ministry. They are: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor....” The time of exile was a time of prophecy preparing the way of the Lord.

(In Amos 5:24, the prophet calls for justice to roll down like water and righteous like an everflowing stream. In God’s economy, all people are sisters and brothers and share equally and are welcomed. The stranger is cherished and welcomed.)

Literally everyone was on the move and most went into exile at some time. This includes the prophets, the priests, and the people. Exile shows no mercy; however, there are persons who did not and do not go into exile. **2 Kings 24:14** explains, “Then he led away into exile all Jerusalem and all the captains and all the mighty men of valor, ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and the smiths. None remained except the poorest people of the land.”

(This situation continues to this day. It is not uncommon for the poorest to be left behind, those who simply are not able to pick up and move and must remain in horrific conditions. Some are internally displaced and move to a different part of the country seeking safety and a way to take care of their basic needs. Others are referred to as the internally stuck – things are so bad; there is no possibility of their fleeing.)

The migration story is key to understanding biblical ancestry. In the book of **Ruth**, one family is the focal point. It began with Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons, who took Moabite wives, having to leave Judah and move to Moab because of a famine. Eventually all the men died, and the women were left alone. Naomi was a stranger in a strange land. She learned that there was no longer famine in Judah, so she exercised her right to return. However, she did not go alone. Ruth, her Moabite daughter-in-law, said, in **Ruth 1:16**, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God!” The rest of the story is the story of Boaz adhering closely to God’s requirement to offer hospitality to the stranger. He permitted Ruth to glean, protected her, and eventually married her bringing the undocumented sojourner into the fold, making her part of the family.

(She was an undocumented immigrant and Boaz married her, giving her status in the land. Fortunately for both of them, there were no I-130 family petitions to sign or other immigration regulations to make life difficult. Also, she did not have to leave the country for three to ten years before being allowed to return begin life as his wife. This could be called a marriage of convenience.)

Job also knew the importance of caring for the stranger. In **Job 31:32**, he states, “The alien has not lodged outside, (for) I have opened my doors to the traveler.

(How many of us can say that? However, we may have the opportunity to do just that. The present fear of the stranger in the United States and the targeting of undocumented workers, immigrants, and asylum seekers of certain ethnicities are providing an opportunity for churches to renew and reinstate the biblical concept of inclusive hospitality.)

The Hebrew Bible closes with an admonition from God through the prophet Malachi, who, in **Malachi 3:5**, repeats the words of the Lord of Hosts, “Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.”

(This is a very strong statement against exploitation of undocumented workers and day laborers, and against people and governments who mistreat the strangers in our land. It is an appropriate precursor to the New Testament and the ministry of Jesus.)

The New Testament begins with a migration story, and perhaps the only documented, recorded “alien” story. Alien is a term that is offensive to many, as it brings to mind a vision of someone from outer space. Looking at it in that manner, one might say that perhaps Jesus was truly an “alien.” He came from heaven (the outer limits of space – although he did tell us the kingdom is within) and took the form of a human being to become for us the Refugee Christ. The reality is that all Christians owe their salvation to a refugee.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, to which his parents had traveled because of the taxation decree. Tradition say the Christ Child was born in a manger, a stable, a shed like the children of many of today’s migrants, who are born along the road as their parents seek work and a place to call home. The news of his birth was given first to the shepherds, the group of people lowest on the social scale at that time. They were also a group of migrants, who moved and lived with their flocks doing seasonal work. Also, at the birth of Jesus, “Magi” from the east, who were probably astrological magicians or sorcerers from Persia, Babylon, or Arabia, come to Jerusalem seeking the “child who has been born King of the Jews.” The Bible does not indicate that there were three Magi or that they were kings. In fact, a distinction of “king” and “Magi” is made in **Matthew 2:1**. The term “Magi” comes from the same root as “magic” and “magicians.” Such persons (Dan. 2:2) watched the stars, were able to predict solar and lunar eclipses, and attempted to predict events to come. Strangers/foreigners from afar read the stars and identified the Messiah.

According to Luke, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph stayed in Bethlehem until they took Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to be dedicated and then returned to Nazareth..

According to Matthew, they stayed in Bethlehem until the visit of the Magi. It is estimated that Jesus was about two years old at the time. Once the Magi left, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him. Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son" (**Matthew 2:13-15**).

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph became asylum seekers in Egypt. Without travel documents, they crossed the border, looking for safety and sanctuary. Although they were strangers, someone took them in. Someone welcomed them and protected them.

(Keep ethnicity in mind, to be able to hide in Egypt, the Holy Family would have had to look very much like the people of that land, which would be very different from the modern-day images of them.)

Meanwhile, in Bethlehem, Herod had plans to find and kill Jesus. When he discovered the Magi had left without telling him the location of the Child, he ordered the killing of all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under.

Jesus and his family fled political and religious persecution. These are both present-day grounds for asylum and refugee status.

(However, if the Holy Family arrived at a U.S. border today, it is most likely that Jesus would be sent to a children's detention center, Mary to a women's detention center, and Joseph to a men's detention center. Each would be required to secure their own legal help, or plead their case, on their own, for asylum. Asylum seekers do not receive legal help from the government, and although there are a few family shelters in this country, most families are separated on arrival at the border.)

After the death of Herod, the family was able to return to their home, in the district of Galilee, in a town called Nazareth. That was not Jesus' last move. **Matthew 4:12** explains that eventually he left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea. It was from there that he began to call his disciples to follow him. Later in **Luke 9:58**, Jesus says, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."

(This is the migrant's story. Like Jesus, who had a home in Capernaum, but often no place to lay his head because of his travels, today's migrants, too, have homes in their countries, but no place to lay their heads in the country to which they have migrated.)

Throughout his life, Jesus moved around. He called his disciples to leave what they were doing and to follow him. In fact, if Jesus and the twelve disciples tried to enter the United States today, they would either be the victims of expedited removal, which means they would be immediately returned to their point of origin, or they would, most probably, be put in immigration detention.

They were thirteen Middle Eastern men. They had no specific home. They moved from place to place and often interacted with stigmatized communities. They went away into the mountains and across the lakes. They were suspected of trying to mobilize the masses against the government. It is not known how they supported themselves, and, at times, they met in rented rooms. Large crowds followed them and both the religious and political communities thought they were instigating uprisings of the masses of the poorest of the poor. On arriving in the U.S. today, they would be part of the targeted list of high-level suspicion of terrorism – primarily because of their place of birth and physical appearance.

Jesus was quite active in supporting the people most in need. He readily saw the plight of the day laborers and resonated with their desire to make a living. Most notable is **Matthew 20:1-16**. In it, he likens the kingdom of heaven to a landowner who hires laborers for his vineyard. He hires people throughout the day and pays them all equally, finally summarizing what he does with “the last will be first and the first will be last.” Jesus understood the plight of the workers and resonated with the Hebrew Bible mandate to treat the workers fairly.

This importance of just wages is seen in **Malachi 3:5**, when God says, “...I will be swift to bear witness against...those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of Hosts.” The fair treatment of day laborers is seen in **Leviticus 19:13**, “You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning.”

Jesus knew the scriptures very well. It is not difficult to imagine Jesus standing among the day laborers on any city street looking for work and welcome. Christians who hire day laborers and undocumented workers are reminded of the biblical mandate to care for the stranger because he or she might be Christ in disguise. (Who would want to cheat Jesus out of a just wage?) The importance of fair treatment of workers throughout the Bible is the basis for followers of Christ becoming involved in comprehensive immigration reform.

The most compelling argument Christ gave for caring for the stranger can be found in **Matthew 25:35-41**. In it he gives the inheritance of the kingdom to those who cared for him by stating, “...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison

and you visited me.... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

All of the following are responses to the mandate to offer hospitality to the stranger: Food to the refugees – here and abroad; water to the migrants crossing the desert; an open church door to the stranger with nowhere to turn; clothing to the migrant newly arrived in the north or the refugee being resettled in your town; medical care for migrant workers, immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers; prison visits to detained asylum seekers and immigrants. Responding to these needs can be the foundation of a ministry to the strangers in our communities and our land and are ways to practice inclusive hospitality.

Persons working with immigrant, migrant, refugee, and asylum populations are often heard wondering how to convince more churchgoers to help these members of Christ’s family. Jesus was very clear in his message: Help them and you go to heaven. Don’t help them and you go to hell. Jesus came to bring a new commandment, a commandment of love of all people. He taught love of God, neighbor, and yourself; and he added a completely new thought – a completely new teaching – *love your enemy*. With that he commanded us to love all people. There is no room in Christ’s teachings for “them and us” mentality. In **Matthew 25:40**, he clearly states that all, including people who might be seen as the “least of these,” are members of his family. As we consider ourselves members of his family, obviously we are all in this together and called to care for each other. When Jesus is asked by the young man, “Who is my neighbor?”, Jesus answers through the parable of the Good Samaritan in **Luke 10:33**, who was on a journey, came upon a man – not a Samaritan, most probably someone who would not have spoken to the Samaritan. However, the man had been badly beaten and was in need of help. When the Samaritan saw him, he felt compassion, and cared for him. The Samaritan would have been considered the stranger in the land the outsider, not a citizen of the land. His presence was not wanted by the people of the land, and yet he the outsider is the one who helps the man who has been robbed. He shows compassion and responds by showing love to the person who would consider him an enemy. For this act he becomes known throughout history as “The Good Samaritan.”

Jesus’ life was a life of service to others, without regard for their national origin. His service to strangers can be seen in **Luke 17:1-19** with the healing of the lepers. Ten are made clean, but only one returns. In verse **17-18**, when only the foreigner returns, Jesus asked, “But the other nine, where are they? Were not ten made clean? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Jesus offered his healing love to all. We are called to do the same. Jesus was not only a refugee and a migrant. He was also undocumented both as a child and at the end of his life. We know that Jesus was crucified “outside the gates” of the city because he was not a citizen (**Hebrews 13:12**). As Christians, we know that he died for the sins of the world, but at that time the theological implications of his death were not considered in handing down his sentence. Jesus was crucified

because he was one with the oppressed and marginalized people of that time, and the religious and political powers feared he was instigating an uprising of the poor. The Romans thought Jesus was planning to overthrow those in power. He was one with the stranger, the sojourner, the migrant, the day laborer, the least, the last, and the lost. He did not have the rights of a citizen (*he was one with each and every undocumented migrant in the world*). Because he did not have these rights, his crucifixion had to be outside the gates and it was in the garbage dump of the city. He suffered, so others would not have to do the same.

The next time you hear of the death of an undocumented person, stop a moment and think of the undocumented Christ and remember we never know when the person we are looking at is Christ in one of his disguises. Since 1995, over 3,000 migrants have died crossing the U.S./Mexico border in their search for work and survival.

By reinforcing biblical hospitality, the New Testament urges validation of each person. **Hebrews 13:1-3** urges, “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.” The Greek word for hospitality is “philoxenos.” It means love for the stranger and was recognized as a primary characteristic of the early followers of Christ. The mandate was, is, and remains clear: to live lives of inclusive hospitality, to recognize that Christ comes to us in the form of the stranger, and to be one with the prisoners, the persecuted, the undocumented, the refugee, the migrant, the immigrant, the stranger. Throughout the New Testament, we see people moving freely, without borders, and we see new life, as their lives are changed through contact with Christ and/or his disciples. Paul reinforces this teaching in **Romans 12:13**, with, “Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.”

Jesus’ last message to his disciples was a migration/immigration message. It is a statement that not only calls for migration, but also insists on it. **Matthew 28:18-19** is the great commission, in which Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

(Apparently, Jesus assumes the role of the migrant God traveling with each and every disciple as they move throughout the world. It is also important to remember that at that time, North America was not a known part of the world. At that time, it would have been considered the ends of the earth. We are the ends of the earth; are we obeying everything Jesus commanded?)

But the story was not over at that point. It continued, as followers of Christ became migrant messengers, taking his teachings throughout the known world. They

recognize that divisions between all of humankind have been dismantled. **Galatians 3:29-29** states, “There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” They took this message and belief with them and they traveled as immigrants, as refugees, and as migrants. They were and are imprisoned, they were and are persecuted, and they were and are exiled.

(Religious persecution is still grounds for asylum.)

The early disciples believed they were strangers in this life moving on to the heavenly kingdom. In **I Peter 2:11-13**, they are reminded that they are aliens and exiles in this world. They are the beginning of a long line of pilgrim people and a part of the continuing biblical migratory cycle following the mandates of God, the teachings of Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament ends with John’s writing of the Book of Revelation, in exile, on the Isle of Patmos. The biblical story that began with migration ends with migration and exile, and continues as the migrant God accompanies each and every migrant on his or her journey of hope. And it extends far, far, into the future, with the new Jerusalem, the city of God, on the move, coming from heaven to earth. When that happens, the circle of migration will be completed and the world made new.