



ALIENS AND STRANGERS - LOU WAGENVELD

Deuteronomy 10:12-22; Mathew 25:34-35

Last year I attended the funeral of an 86-year-old third cousin, a 1952 Dutch immigrant. Jake was your classic immigrant, hard-working, large family, church- and community minded. As a board member at his local Christian school, he even gave talks every year to the fourth graders in social studies class about the immigrant experience. It is a bit ironic to me that he was buried out of the same church where I helped advise for the startup of Hispanic migrant services like ESL and Spanish Bible studies; it is also the church from where originated the overture first to Classis Zeeland and then to synod for a denominational study committee on the migration of workers. That report took three years, and its recommendations were approved by last year's synod. (That fifty-page report is available in the Agenda for Synod and online. As a missionary pastor with a lifetime of service in the Hispanic context, and you as supporters of our church's missions programs, I'd like to ask for your prayerful consideration of this important matter.)

I'd also like to preach this morning on this issue, which isn't just a denominational concern, but a national one: witness the long-standing debate over immigration, inflamed with the voters' passage of immigration laws in Arizona and Alabama. Recent news magazines and the papers have carried reports and analysis of these laws. How can biblically informed Christians contribute to this debate and process? To make that contribution is one of the principal recommendations of this report.

Against that background, I want to continue with a poem written by a Latino farm worker called "Un Pensamiento"—"A Thought." []

Migrant or immigrant, legal or illegal, Latin or Asian, refugee or exile, the human (or should we say "inhuman"?) drama of aliens and strangers goes on without ceasing. What is a drama for them is seemingly a dilemma for others. "What about the strangers in our midst"? That report now hopefully becomes a denomination-wide discussion and concern, but frankly, while I keep an ear out for it, I hear very little. Too many sports scores to keep track of? Economics to sort out?

In two trips last year I spent almost five weeks in Central America. Vying with Guatemala and now Mexico, El Salvador is the most violent country in the Western Hemisphere, with 13 homicides daily in that small country, mostly young people. In his address to his congress while I was there, the Salvadoran president mentioned the estimated two and a half million Salvadorans living in the U.S. No one knows how many of them are here legally; our congress extended the Temporary Protection Act because of humanitarian considerations for many of those who fear returning. When we were in Los Angeles for 15 years during the period of two civil wars in Central America, we witnessed firsthand the fear and deep pain of many refugees.

I wrote up one of those stories in *The Banner*--of a woman whose first husband was killed there. The very week of its publication she was informed from El Salvador that her estranged husband, father of the three children with her here, had also been murdered. He had been deported by the United States back to El Salvador less than a year earlier.

The inhuman drama, the human dilemma!

By now not only are intense feelings arising within you, also certain thoughts and questions are also surfacing, like: But what can we do? There are so many refugee problems all over the world; the United States has already absorbed many of them, and we have difficulties on that score as well. And think about jobs and unemployment here, now worsened with the economic downturn. There are security concerns with our borders, and drug and criminal activity—when will it stop?! America can't do everything!

Nearly 30 years ago, *The Banner* called immigration one of the most pressing and important questions of our times. But I know of very few, if any, articles or discussions that have taken place at the congregational or denominational levels. Some of you may have read the article in *The Banner* last year about the situation of the young undocumented immigrant in Iowa; finally, placed there because of the upcoming discussion at synod of the Report on the Migration of Workers.

With that complex introduction, I want to get started with you at gaining a biblical perspective that must inform and shape all else that we study and do regarding this matter. How must we feel and how must we act toward aliens and strangers? Will we unconsciously continue to project what our institutions wisely advise children: "Kids, don't go with strangers"? No, I believe as adults we'll be biblical! Go with me into some broad strokes of the Bible.

The Old Testament

Genesis 3. Who were the first exiles? Adam and Eve were sent out of the garden. Exiled!

In Genesis 12 the first words God spoke to Abraham were "Leave . . . go." In chapter 12 we see a famine drive Abram to Egypt, where his life is in danger. He is later called a "wandering Aramean." In chapters 26 and 32 Isaac and Jacob are portrayed as respectively needing protection and as sojourners (aliens).

That already gives a basic biblical pattern, described in the New Testament in Hebrews 11:8-9. "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." Verse 13 calls them "strangers and exiles on the earth."

That is true in a symbolic (spiritualized) way, if you will; but also in a real and literal sense. So we can draw out principles and guidelines from Scripture, as for example in our Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy, which is repeated from Exodus 23:9: "Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt." Another version translates this, "You know the heart of a stranger"! Do we? Still another version (TLB) reads: "you know what it's like . . . you have your own experience." Or have we forgotten that likely two-thirds of us here today are only a generation or two away from the immigrant experience? Old Dutch-broque cousin Jake was a good reminder; many of you know people or have relatives like him.

The Bible goes on with this exhortation: not only to not oppress, but to "love the alien (the sojourner)" (Deut. 10:19). I conclude from that that one way of loving is not to oppress, or as Peterson's *The Message* says, "not take advantage of." You figure out the applications of that!

Here is a quotation from a New York priest in a piece he wrote titled "When I Was a Stranger": "Migration seems as old as human life. War, famine, religious persecution, political oppression and exile force people to leave their lands against their will. Today, these same patterns persist, compounded by unequal distribution of wealth and land, exploitation of resources, paralyzing poverty and repression of human rights." It goes on to say: "Our Biblical tradition and migration are interwoven. We find there the revered concept of respect for the stranger and the foreigner." Where he uses the word "respect" I find the Bible using the word "love"!

We go on with tracing the Bible's pattern: The Israelites became slaves in a foreign land, then nomads in the desert, later exiles and captives in Babylon. Psalm 137:1 says, "We sat down and wept when we remembered Zion." Nostalgically the Israelites ask: "How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land"?

The New Testament

Who do you think of as the first refugees in the New Testament? Joseph, Mary, and Jesus? They had to flee from King Herod to Egypt. Jesus, a refugee!

Two outstanding relevant teachings of this Jesus are:

1) In the story of the Good Samaritan, in answer to the question "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus gives the example of a despised stranger. The story is of a border, another culture, of shunning. And of mercy. A question: who would Jesus pick today to illustrate his story?

2) Our New Testament lesson, Matthew 25:34-35, is a judgment parable. In it one of the key questions asked is "What did you do for the stranger?" So for us it is not: "What can we do?" Rather, the question is "What did you do?" Because someday we will be asked: "What did you do?"

This then is some of the witness of the Scriptures; what will we do with the alien and the stranger? We have to be very careful not to just proof-text the applications of our foregone conclusions ("those illegals are breaking the law") or our prejudices ("they are taking jobs away from us"). We can persist in negative and selfish attitudes and actions toward others different from ourselves. Or we can heed the warnings of both the Old Testament and Christ in the gospels:

Exodus 22:21: "Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt."

That is echoed and amplified in Leviticus 19:33, 34: "When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God." That is like God saying, "Did you hear me?"

A report from a large U.S. denomination closes by citing from Leviticus 24:22: "You are to have the same law for the alien and the native-born. I am the Lord your God."

Here I must insert a little pointed and poignant humor that some of you may have heard before. A cartoon shows some American Indians greeting the pilgrims coming ashore off the Mayflower; now over three centuries later, on a remote Indian reservation. One modern Native says to another, "We sure didn't have good immigration policies and laws in place back then, did we?"

In a similar vein, many Mexican-American folk of the Southwest say, "We didn't cross the border; they moved the line." The reference, of course, is to the Mexican-American War of 1848.

East of Escondido N.S.D. Cty there is a tourist attraction. Thousands visit the Wild Animal Park and pass right by with no knowledge of the Battle of San Pasqual, the only one won by Mexico!

If the New Testament doesn't explicitly say more than it does, might it be because Jesus and Paul took as well known and understood the Old Testament teachings and moral imperatives? There was Peter, who in Acts 10 needed an attitude adjustment. So in his first pistle (1:1 and 2:11-12) he writes, "To God's elect, strangers in the world. . . . Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and strangers in the world" (note the redundancy) "to . . . live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." I understand that to be Judgment Day.

Christian friends and citizens, "aliens and strangers in this world," let's apply what we've seen from the Scriptures to this pressing problem and live it out as we hear in Isaiah 58:6-11a:

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice, and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?
Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.
Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.
If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
and if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.
The LORD will guide you....."
Amen.