



UNTITLED SERMON - MATT SAPP

If you know me at all, you know that I enjoy history. A lot of my Facebook posts start out with, “On this day in 1947. . . .” I also enjoy reflecting on the historical significance of holidays.

On November 6, 2011, I had the opportunity to share a message on immigration at Bethel CRC in Sun Valley, California. This was a special day for me, because it was the 25th anniversary of the Immigration Reform and Control Act that President Reagan signed into law in 1986.

The silver anniversary of immigration reform was an appropriate reason to talk about immigration in church. But it is not the only reason to talk about immigration.

On September 10, The New York Times reported that President Obama plans to increase the number of Syrian refugees allowed into the United States to 10,000. In his plan, he would like to see the total number of immigrants increased to 100,000 per year.

With the 2016 elections approaching quickly, the comments of Donald Trump have made immigration a major political issue as we prepare to enter into the voting booth.

We are faced with these issues every night during the evening news. So what exactly does the Bible say about immigration? I would like to spend a few moments remembering immigration in the biblical narrative and reflecting on what our response should be to God’s Word and the global epidemic.

Let’s start at the beginning. . . .

Adam and Eve

Genesis 3:23-24: “So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove them out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim with a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the Tree of Life.”

- While deportation may look like part of Adam and Eve’s punishment for eating the forbidden fruit, it was actually an act of love, because God wanted to protect them from the Tree of Life in their fallen state.
- In the very next chapter, Cain kills his brother, Abel. In Genesis 4:12, God told Cain that part of his punishment would be that Cain would become a restless wanderer on the earth.
- With these two early examples, one could say that immigration has been a part of our story since our story began.
- In these first two stories, immigration is the product of sin. But that is not always the case.

Abram

Genesis 12:1-4: “The Lord said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people, and your father’s household, and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing . . . all peoples of the earth will be blessed through you.’ So Abram left, as the Lord had told him.”

- God did turn Israel into a great nation. And the entire world has been blessed through Israel, because Jesus was born a Jew, and he provided salvation for the whole world.
- Everything that God promised Abram came true. But before any of that could happen, Abram had to leave his country and his family and live as an immigrant!

Jacob and Joseph

Genesis 49:27: “Now the Israelites settled in Egypt in the region of Goshen. They acquired property there and were fruitful and increased greatly in number.”

- You remember that Abram had a son, and through Isaac the nation of Israel was born. The family/nation continued to grow until the time of Jacob.
- Jacob had 12 sons. But, his favorite son was Joseph, and everyone knew it when Jacob gave Joseph his coat of many colors. The other brothers became jealous and were about to kill him when instead they threw him into a cistern and sold him into slavery. They returned his bloody coat to their father and suggested that a wild animal must have attacked him.
- We all know that Joseph’s life was full of successes and disappointments. But eventually he found himself in Egypt, at the right hand of Pharaoh when God allowed him to prepare for a seven-year famine. Eventually Joseph’s brothers found themselves bowing before him, just as he had dreamed years before, begging for grain.
- When they eventually realized who they were standing before, they became fearful for their lives. But when Joseph saw this, he responded by saying, “Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me. But God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”
- So Joseph invited the family to immigrate to Egypt, where God blessed them.

Moses

Exodus 3:7-10: “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. . . . So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

- God provided for the nation through Joseph when they emigrated to Egypt. And God blessed Israel while she was in Egypt for 400 years. But Egypt was not Israel’s home. The time had come for Israel to emigrate out of Egypt and return to the Promised Land—a land flowing with milk and honey. Again, God’s people are on the move.
- It is interesting to note that God wanted Israel to never forget their time as immigrants, so he commanded that they celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (or Sukkoth), when all the Jews were to make a pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem and live as immigrants for seven days in little booths.

Ruth

Ruth 1:16: "But Ruth replied, 'Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.'"

- The book of Ruth begins with a famine in the land, so a man from Bethlehem decided to pack his family up and move to Moab. Eventually he and his two sons died, and Naomi was left with her two daughters-in-law.
- Naomi asked the two girls to help her pack and return to Bethlehem. But then she told them to go back to their families; there was no reason for them to move to a strange place and take care of her. Orpah kissed her goodbye and left. But Ruth would not let Naomi go without her. She was willing to become an immigrant and an alien in a strange land in order to take care of her mother-in-law.
- Eventually Ruth met Boaz, who acted as her kinsman redeemer and married her. But before her "happily ever after," she made a decision to become an immigrant.
- She vows to Naomi that "Your people will become my people, and your God will become my God." Even though she was a Moabite, even though she was an outsider, God chose this immigrant to be included in the genealogy of Jesus Christ, as we see in Matthew 1:5.

Babylonian Exile

Daniel 1:1: "In the third reign of Jehoiakim, King of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it."

- The Babylonian exile included three Jewish deportations within a span of 50 years, between 588-538 B.C. It is referenced in 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Jeremiah, and Daniel.
- The story of Daniel in the lion's den, as well as the story of the three Hebrews being cast into the fiery furnace, both took place when God's people were living as forced immigrants in Babylon.

Jesus Christ

Matthew 2:13-15: "When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. 'Get up,' he said. Take the child and his mother, and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.'"

- Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt in order to save the life of the baby Jesus. They could not return until Herod was dead. According to Josephus, Herod the Great died a painful death in 4 AD from kidney failure. This means that Jesus lived as a political refugee in Egypt until he was 4 or 5 years old.
- Sometimes when we are going through a hard time and there is drama in our lives, we are tempted to believe that Jesus does not know what we are going through. But in Hebrews 4:15, the Bible says that "we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses. But we have One who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, and yet he was without sin."
- Many of us in the CRC are immigrants. And sometimes we may be tempted to think that we have to deal with issues that Jesus just wouldn't understand. But this just isn't the case. Jesus spent the first five years of his life as a refugee, so he understands more than we think.

The Pilgrims

- Much of the Bible was built on the stories of immigrants. But sometimes we forget that much of our history in the United States was built upon the stories of immigrants too.
- In the 1600s, a group of Calvinist separatists left the Church of England. They felt that within the Church of England there was a lot of tradition that was not based on the Bible. So in 1607 the group moved to Amsterdam, in The Netherlands. In 1609, they relocated to Leiden, in South Holland. In Leiden they felt accepted because the city was very tolerant of differing views and lifestyles. The Separatists remained in Leiden for 11 years, as they found a community with the Dutch Mennonites and French-speaking Calvinists. But after 11 years they grew tired of the permissive community that embraced them, so they boarded the Mayflower in 1620 and set sail for America.
- At least half of the pilgrims on the Mayflower were religious refugees in search of a safe place where they could worship freely in a way they believed would honor God.

How then shall we live? How should we respond to the rich immigration heritage that we share as Americans and as Christians? Here are three questions.

How do we respond to our immigrants?

- Exodus 22:21: “Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt.”
- Exodus 23:9: “Do not oppress an alien. You yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt.”
- This also reminds me of the parable Jesus told in Matthew 25 about the King separating the sheep from the goats. Lord, when did we see you hungry and not feed you? Or thirsty, and not give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger, and not invite you in? Or naked and not clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison, and not visit you? The King responded, “Whatever you have done to the least of these, you have done it unto me.”
- At the end of September 2010, The New York Times published a story of Daniel Millis receiving a ticket for littering in the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge in Arizona. How was he littering? He was working with a faith-based group from Tucson called No More Deaths, who place gallon jugs of clean water in the Arizona desert. Between 2002-2009, over 1,700 illegal aliens died in southern Arizona. So volunteers go to the wilderness refuges and place jugs of water, with pictures of hearts and crosses, and the phrase “Good luck, friends.” This reminds me of the words of Jesus in Matthew 10:42: “And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.”

How do we respond to our world?

1 Peter 2:11: “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.”

- Throughout history, different people and different groups have lived as aliens in different countries. But here, Peter tells the church that the believers are aliens and strangers in this world.
- I have talked to different immigrants who have been in the United States for several years. Even though this is their home now, it doesn't really feel like home, because they are from a different country. But when they return home after several years, they find that they have lost touch with how things are in their country, and it is even hard to reconnect with friends and family. The United States does not feel like home, and their homeland no longer feels like home.
- While this is sad, I believe that this is the attitude that all Christians should have. We can enjoy earth while we are here. But we should not get too comfortable, because this place is not our home.

- Charles Kingsley, the English author and clergyman, talked about a divine discontent. Do you have it? We should be living as immigrants, longing for our true home.

Have you responded to God's gift of citizenship?

Philippians 3:20: "But our citizenship is in Heaven, and we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ."

- I know that for many immigrants, their ultimate goal is citizenship. But the only thing worse than not gaining citizenship is believing you have it and then finding out that you don't. Several years ago we learned the story of Leeland Davidson, a 95-year-old WW II vet from Centralia, Washington. He made plans to visit some family in Canada, so he went to the DMV and asked if they would renew his special ID before his trip. But the DMV refused because he was Canadian. Even though both his parents were citizens, Leeland was born in British Columbia in 1916, and the family never registered his birth in the States.
 - To make matters worse, his dad was born in Iowa in 1878, and the state did not start keeping records of births until 1880. So there was no way to prove that his parents were citizens, either.
 - The family is concerned about this, because if it does not get resolved before he passes, he is going to lose all his Social Security benefits and other resources.
 - At the time this story was published, Washington State Senator Patty Murray had taken up his cause, and was fighting for his citizenship.
- Where is your citizenship? Are you sure that it is in Heaven?
 - We cannot rely on the citizenship of our parents, like Leeland did.
 - We cannot rely on any good works that we have done, like serving in the Navy during WWII, like Leeland did.
 - We can only depend on a powerful advocate. But our advocate is not some senator from Washington. Our Advocate is the only begotten Son of God, the only mediator between God and man.
 - If you are not sure if your citizenship is in Heaven, make sure today. All you have to do is talk to our Great Advocate, the Lord Jesus Christ.