

Joy: God Beyond Borders – Migrant Justice
Zeph. 3:14-20; Is 12:2-6; Phil 4:4-7; L 3:7-18

It feels good to be in a place that doesn't need this sermon. So please take it as a reminder & further food for thought. One way to get some kind of grasp on the complexities and emotions of refugees & the countries they try to get to is to study quotes. Some are shared in the hand out in your mail box and on the back shelf.

Patrick Ness, in the book, [The Knife of Never Letting Go](#) has this conversation. "Why did the first settlers come?" Hildy asks me. "Why does anyone look for a new place to live?"

"Cuz the place yer a-leaving ain't worth staying for," Tam says. "Cuz the place yer a-leaving is so bad ye gotta leave."

Another provocative perspective comes from Mark Steyn. He says, "I believe Western culture -- rule of law, universal suffrage, etc. - is preferable to Arab culture: that's why there are millions of Muslims in Scandinavia, and four Scandinavians in Syria. Follow the traffic. I support immigration, but with assimilation."

Immigrants, refugees and migrants are vulnerable. This issue affects economics, politics, the size of local school systems, and so many other issues. There are many heartwarming stories of courage and welcoming. But there are too many stories that are hard to hear they are so traumatic. Horrible stories of violence, abuse, rape, war, death and economic loss. All because people have no hope, peace, joy or love around them. Even many of their efforts to try to find a better life are sad and unjust as they become prey, at times to their own people.

A British Broadcasting Center news story asks, Why do so many people want to leave **Eritrea** for Europe? After Syria, Eritrea in East Africa, provides the second largest number of people looking to migrate to Europe. One in 10 of all prospective migrants to Europe are Eritrean, and the UN estimates around 4,000 people leave the country every month.

Most of the people say they are fleeing military service, but the Eritrean government maintains those who leave are economic migrants. Clive Myrie reports from a refugee camp in Ethiopia near the border with Eritrea.

Eritreans live in a dictatorship that has been under the rule of one man for the last 25 years. There is no freedom of speech or rule of law. Military service is forced on all for boys and girls – with no end in sight. It's actually forced labor. Often children are sent out of Eritrea by parents, because the unknown is actually more hopeful. They try to go west to Sudan, Egypt and of course Europe. Escaping a despot is worth risking their lives. That's desperation!

I know a Muslim from **Syria**, who is in Calgary now, with a wife & 3 kids. He happily showed pictures of his beautiful small Syrian farm and said that for most of their food – they just had to go out into their lush garden. He worked for 10 years in Cyprus as a block layer and driving construction equipment in order to build a good house for his family. It was all gone in a second from one bomb. He was unable to move on to other topics in our conversation, including looking and planning forward. I think he was so full of PTSD, that he was stuck emotionally. He was not able to express much joy.

A person who works with refugees in the United States shares this is what occurs in **South America**. Drug cartels tell some young boys that they need to join their gang. They start with young kids so they can raise them up and indoctrinate them in their culture. Families say, "Oh, please don't do this." The gangs say, "No, you will do this. Your son will join our gang." Families say, "No please, please don't." When the boy doesn't, in a short time, they take the boy's father and kill him in front of the boy just to make a statement. This stuff happens all the time to many people. Government is not a source of protection. No wonder people flee - within countries and to other countries.

Christmas is a wonderful time of year, full of warm fuzzies. But if we take the scriptures we

usually use for the advent season, we should be scared stiff. There is much joy, but there are also warnings, judgements, justice is coming.

Just take our texts today. **Zephaniah** speaks these words of joyful celebration and hope to Israel, reminding them that God will take away his judgement and rescue them from their enemies. Then he promises to save the lame and gather the outcasts when he deals with all oppressors. But where is the celebration for the refugees and migrants who have to leave their homes in order to find work? Where is the rejoicing for the migrants who are separated from their loved ones? In the midst of a difficult situation, where does the migrant worker find his or her joy?

Zephaniah's words invite us to look deeply at the stories of refugees to understand where they find joy in their lives. While we celebrate and rejoice with the God who gathers the outcasts and brings us home, we remember those who are far from home and facing difficult working conditions and barriers to making this country their home. Where does the migrant worker find shelter & home? Is there room in the inn?

The words from **Isaiah** were spoken to a people living under the Assyrian empire, to a people who needed reassurance and hope. In the midst of uncertain times, the people are encouraged to not fear and to trust in God and to give thanks for God's great work of salvation and redemption. "I will trust, and will not be afraid." It takes courage to utter this prayer. As we face difficult times, it's hard to not fear and it's hard to place our trust in God. Certainly this is true for immigrants and those working to make changes to the labour conditions for migrant workers. Taking a stand for migrant justice is one way to help workers build courage and relationships of trust and joy.

Philippians reminds us to stop worrying, which is something we all need to hear. But it's hard to rejoice when we're drowning in worry. So Paul encourages his listeners to lift up their worries to God in prayer and receive

the gift of peace. So many people in our world have so many worries. As we seek to understand the situation of new citizens and migrant workers in Canada we might ask ourselves: what worries do they face? To go further, we can also seek to understand how we are implicit in creating and perpetuating these worries. How can we let our gentleness be known to everyone – including refugees so they find joy?

Then in our **Luke** text, we hear the familiar Christmas theme of "something new." John proclaims to his listeners that change is coming. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" And he threatened them that they were producing bad fruit – evil living. The crowds responded positively and asked, "What then should we do?" Without hesitation, John tells them to repent by sharing their wealth, to be just in their dealing with others, and to treat others with dignity and respect. John connects justice and right relationships with Jesus' reign. Jesus is coming! God's reign of justice and peace is upon us! Participate by living fairly in your own life, community, and context to find joy.

When we hear **John's** words, we are invited to ask: what then should we do? How might life be different for refugees and migrant workers if we, personally, communally, nationally and internationally, took John's advice to heart: the call to share what we have, to be fair with wealth, and to treat others with dignity, respect, compassion, and love? We can encourage and help new Canadians assimilate & learn English.

Perhaps **John** would say to us: institute fair labour practices, welcome those with all kinds of needs, provide health care, and make citizenship attainable. Perhaps John would shout at us: Welcome and honour the strangers, people of color, neighbours, migrant workers as you would welcome Christ! This is what we can do to prepare for the coming of the Messiah into our daily lives. And we do it with joy.

Our advent theme this year, Seeking Shelter, from Kairos, Canadian Ecumenical Justice

Initiatives, reminds us that hope, peace, joy and love are what we receive because Jesus was sent by Yahweh to earth. And we in turn, are to offer these aspects of life to everyone. This is part of the justice of the Almighty God that we are encouraged to join in with - participate in bringing joy by doing and promoting justice.

The Christmas story is full of strange, weird symbolic upside down events that are messages for us today. The first people God informs about the birth of Jesus are shepherds – the bottom of the social strata.

Yahweh choose to work through a young girl and a carpenter from what was viewed as red neck country. They are called out – to become refugees, migrants from a vengeful king.

The story of there being no room in the inn is much more than a simple cute story. It's symbolic of making room for Jesus in our lives, and it suggests we need to be like the innkeeper in welcoming the powerless, displaced, weak and fearful.

Inviting foreign kings, wise men, to go and worship the baby – is another biblical rebuke to the nation of Israel, who ignored messenger after messenger from God, and still do today. So God reached out to foreigners, people from another land, people with another religion, and invited them to worship the King of Kings.

And why would we hear about Anna and Simeon – two elderly has beens, ready to die? Because their words resonate with the wisdom of Heavenly hope, peace, joy and love. So to declare that Advent is about Joy: God Beyond Borders – Migrant Justice, makes a lot of sense.

As we close, I would encourage us to ponder quotes, articles & Biblical themes that offer important perspectives about migration. Plus we know real problems are difficult to improve by racism, fear, and prejudice. We have to conquer and resist these kinds of attitudes. It's not unusual that we also get caught up in the problems as we allow governments to be cruel.

So let's turn this quote from **Ijeoma Umebinyuo**, out of the book, [Questions for Ada](#), into a blessing when we come face to face with refugees, immigrants and migrant workers:

“Here's to the security guards who maybe had a degree in another land.
Here's to the manicurist who had to leave her family to come here, painting the nails, scrubbing the feet of strangers.
Here's to the janitors who don't understand English yet work hard despite it all.
Here's to the fast food workers who work hard to see their family smile.
Here's to the laundry man at the Marriott who told me with the sparkle in his eyes how he was an engineer in Peru.
Here's to the bus driver, the Turkish Sufi who almost danced when I quoted Rumi.
Here's to the harvesters who live in fear of being deported for coming here to open the road for their future generation.
Here's to the taxi drivers from Nigeria, Ghana, Egypt and India who gossip amongst themselves.
Here is all immigrants, waking up at 4 am, calling home to hear the voices of their loved ones.
Here is to their children, to the children who despite it all become artists, writers, teachers, doctors, lawyers, engineers, activists and rebels.
Here's to international money transfers. For never forgetting home.
Here's to their children who carry the heart beats of their motherland and even in sleep, speak with pride about their fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers.

Keep on

Let's keep on creating the conditions for joy for all people. As followers of Jesus: May we encourage all individuals, all faiths, and all countries, to catch our Creator's vision, to join with Almighty God to offer justice so that hope, peace, joy and love, abound – every where, with everyone, worldwide.