

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **People on the Move**

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

"So many people trying to find their footing in this country right now." That's the way one news anchor described the situation in Ukraine. Huge numbers of people have decided that finding stability and safety is impossible, so they've set out, often on foot, to a new place and a new situation. At this point, an estimated two million refugees have fled Ukraine. At least half of them are children. Many of you have probably seen the footage and photos of women with their sons and daughters, traveling by car or bus or train, or in many cases walking miles and miles, to another town or city or country, seeking refuge.

These waves of Ukrainian refugees fleeing Russia's invasion come not that long after last summer's mass exodus of Afghans as U.S. troops withdrew from the country and the Taliban seized power. As the process of resettling these Afghan refugees goes on, we now witness this large-scale movement of people to the countries bordering Ukraine, especially Poland, where agencies, organizations, and individuals have stepped forward to welcome and provide for the millions who are on the move.

Our International Mission Board has personnel in Warsaw, Poland. These missionaries have been instrumental in forming partnerships with the Polish Baptist Union and making plans to care for Ukrainian refugees. The Polish Baptist Union initially hoped to house 500 refugees. They have since doubled that number to 1,000. They've also increased the number of centers designated to receive refugees from eight to 40. These camps are outfitted with sheets, pillows, food, and hygiene items. One of these centers is located at the First Baptist Church of Gdansk. Some of its members waited, and slept, in a van for hours at the Poland-Ukraine border, ready to receive women and children who had been waiting for hours in lines that were several kilometers long.

God's work through our Polish brothers and sisters in Christ is just one example of how followers of Jesus are responding to the plight of refugees. This is more than just a matter of goodwill toward our fellow human beings. It's most of all a matter of obedience to God's call for his people to act justly toward the oppressed, the sojourners, and the uprooted. God's command to live righteously through love of our neighbor weaves its way throughout the biblical story, from beginning to end. From the outset of his covenant with his people, God has been responsive to the cries of the dislocated and the displaced.

In fact, God's relationship with his people is grounded in the experience of being uprooted and on the move. In today's text from Deuteronomy, Moses continues a long sermon in which he gives the people instructions about how to live in covenant with God and with one another. These laws include directions about offerings and tithes at the beginning and conclusion of harvest. In our text, the individual landowner is told to come before the altar with a full basket and acknowledge receipt of the land promised to the ancestors. This ritual also includes recalling and reciting the history of the people from the time of the ancestors until the present moment.

Notice how this recitation recounts a communal faith journey, beginning with a landless ancestor. "Then you shall declare before the Lord your God: 'My father was a wandering Aramean..." (v. 5). This is probably a reference to Jacob, also known by the name Israel,

who fled from his brother Esau's enmity to live with relatives in Aram and then later emigrated with his family to Egypt to survive a famine. So the worshiper's own confession of faith traces God's action all the way back to a figure who was on the move, escaping from the hostility of the enemy, uprooted and seeking a place of safety and stability.

Then the worshiper's confession of faith goes beyond the travels of Jacob and into the journey of God's people as a whole. Jacob and his clan multiplied, prospered, and became a great nation. But their prosperity brought oppression from the Egyptians, so the people cried out to God. And God saw. God heard. God paid attention to their oppression. He felt compassion for their condition, and acted on their behalf. He lifted them from their misery and brought them out, eventually bringing them to a land of their own. Here was now a home for these homeless immigrants. And now, from the bounty of this land, God's people were instructed to bring an offering, acknowledging the Lord as the source of their deliverance, the giver of life, and the author of abundance.

Through this act of worship, the dedication of an offering, the people reaffirmed who they are, and who God is. A landless, destitute people, on the move, without a place of their own, rescued by a God who had now bound his identity and purpose to them. By retelling their story, God's people were not only following God's instructions but were also cultivating an ethic of empathy, a culture of compassion, for including and sharing with those who were landless and vulnerable. At other points in his sermon, Moses reminds the people that they should include everyone, including the foreigners among them, in the distribution of the land's abundance, because they themselves were once slaves in Egypt. When it comes to those who are poor, uprooted, and without a place of their own, remember that you yourselves were once poor, uprooted, and without a place of your own.

Earlier I mentioned the exodus of Afghans who have come to the United States since American forces withdrew from their country last August. Estimates were that tens of thousands of refugees would arrive in need of the basics of life. That's why resettlement agencies have been working with organizations and individuals to find housing. One of the families that opened its doors was Kenneth and Adi Martinez, and their two small children. They live in Seattle, Washington. When the opportunity arose, they offered a spare bedroom to a family from Afghanistan. Kenneth's words were telling. He said, "We know exactly what it feels like to come to a brand-new country with no family or anything."<sup>1</sup> Their own experience of being uprooted and vulnerable had contributed to their empathy for others who were dislocated and without a place of their own.

When the landowner took his basketful of God's generosity and offered it as an affirmation of God's faithfulness to his promise, he declared, "Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil, and oppression" (v. 7). God was moved by the plight of the people. He was touched by their misery. God moved into action and got inside their suffering. He identified himself with them. He tied his will and purpose to their vulnerability and helplessness. He brought them out, brought them through, and brought them to a place of their own.

Author and speaker Jill Briscoe tells about an occasion when she needed to communicate the gospel to an assembly of refugees. She recalls:

In Croatia I was asked to speak to a church gathering for about 200 newly arrived refugees. Refugees from this area of the world are mostly women because the men are either dead or in camp or fighting. This group of Muslims, Croats, and a few Serbs had fled to a seminary on the border of a battered Croatian town. The town was still in danger of sniper fire and bombing, but the church had escaped because there were apartment buildings between it and the guns. Attackers had tried to fire shells over the apartment buildings to the seminary, but they hadn't managed to do it, so it became the refugee receiving and feeding place.

We worked all day visiting with the refugees. At night a service was held in this huge, old church, and I had to speak. I didn't know what to say. Everything I had prepared seemed totally inadequate, so I put my notes away and prayed, "God, give me creative ideas they can identify with."

I told them about Jesus, who as a baby became a refugee. He was hunted by soldiers, and his parents had to flee to Egypt at night, leaving everything behind. I could tell the people began to click with what I was saying. I kept praying like crazy.

I continued telling them about Jesus' life, and when I got to the cross, I said, "He hung there naked, not like pictures tell you." They knew what that meant. Some of them had been stripped naked and tortured.

At the end of the message, I said, "All these things have happened to you. You are homeless. You have had to flee. You have suffered unjustly. But you didn't have a choice. He had a choice. He knew all this would happen to him, but he still came." And then I told them why. Many of them just knelt down, put their hands up, and wept. I said, "He's the only one who really understands. How can I possibly understand, but he can. This is what people did to him. He's the suffering God. You can give your pain to him."<sup>2</sup>

Long before the Israelites started giving God a portion of the harvest, they gave God their pain. He heard the Israelites' cries, and saw their misery and oppression. God saved them, and identified himself with this people-on-the-move. Not surprising, considering the fact that God multiplied this people out of a "wandering Aramean." From the start, God has tied his identity and purpose to dislocated, vulnerable, and often landless people. People like the refugees we see on the screens of our TVs and other devices.

When we look at them, we see not just them, but Christ. And when we hear them, we hear not just them, but Christ. And when we respond to them, we respond not just to them, but to Christ. Your response may take the form of praying for them, or giving financially to help them. Whatever form your offering takes, present it to the Lord, acknowledging the salvation he has accomplished for us in Christ. The Christ who made the journey from the realm of heaven to this earthly realm where we live. The Christ who as a child fled with his parents, a refugee from the wrath of Herod. The Christ whose life and ministry kept him on the move, without property of his own. The Christ who ended up abandoned and rejected, fastened to a cross, then buried in a borrowed tomb. This is the Christ to whom we respond when we act compassionately toward people who are on the move.

Folks like us, who live far from war and violence, who don't face the threat of being uprooted and removed from all that's familiar to us, must be on guard against indifference or a lack of empathy. We need to remember the words of humanitarian and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, who stated in one of his speeches:

Indifference elicits no response. Indifference is not a response. Indifference is not a beginning; it is an end. And, therefore, indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor—never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten. The political prisoner in his cell, the hungry children, the homeless refugees—not to respond to their plight, not to relieve their solitude by offering them a spark of hope is to exile them from human memory. And in denying their humanity, we betray our own.<sup>3</sup>

May God, who is both moved and on the move, care for all those seeking refuge. May he stir our compassion for them, and keep us all headed toward the promised land of his kingdom.

<sup>1</sup> Catherine Garcia, "Immigrant family in Washington welcomes Afghan refugees into their home," *The Week* (September 16, 2021); Katie Kindelan, "US families step up to welcome Afghan refugees in their homes," *Good Morning America* (September 13, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Jill Briscoe, "Keeping the Adventure in Ministry," *Leadership Journal* (Summer 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Elie Wiesel, "The Perils of Indifference." [www.americanrhetoric.com](http://www.americanrhetoric.com).