

Cornel Barnett
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
May 5, 2013
6th Sunday of Easter

Exodus 1:8-14; 1 Peter 2:11-12
“Reading the Bible with Immigrant Eyes”

This year two cultural holidays coincided with Sunday: St. Patrick’s Day and *Cinco de Mayo*. We normally give a nod to these holidays in worship. We gave more than a nod on St. Patrick’s Day. We weaved his “Breastplate Prayer” throughout the service and Barbara provided good Irish music. Today, on *Cinco de Mayo*, Barbara arranged for Spanish music and I will offer biblical reflections on immigration to connect with our Latina/Latino sisters and brothers.

My sermon is inspired by a chapter in a book called *Neighbor: Christian Encounters with “Illegal” Immigration* written by Presbyterian pastor, Ben Daniel. The book has chapters on immigration as a biblical journey, immigration in church history, the politics of immigration reform, the plight of migrants in their journey north and the new sanctuary movement.

The former moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Rick Ufford-Chase states that the book is the primer on immigration he’d been waiting for: part theological reflection, part historical study, part political analysis, and part compelling stories shared by a gifted writer. I’ve been looking for something like this to understand this difficult terrain from a thoughtful and caring, Christian perspective.

Samuel Kobia, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, says that the Bible is the “ultimate immigration handbook.” Daniel makes a pretty good case for this although he affirms rightly that the Bible is not exclusively about immigration. He writes about an “immigration spirituality” found in much of the Bible

He begins with his own story. He had a conventional, homogeneous upbringing beyond the redwood curtain in northern California. He attended Westmont College, an evangelical liberal arts college nestled in the beautiful mountains behind Santa Barbara. It provided him the opportunity to attend an urban studies program in San Francisco’s Mission District.

There he worked with refugees from Central America – almost all of whom were in the United States illegally – at an Episcopal ministry called the Good Samaritan Center. One of his jobs was to help undocumented workers find employment and to see that they were treated fairly and paid a decent wage.

He was given a task to represent a Mayan refugee from Guatemala's bloody and protracted war civil war who was owed several hundred dollars in back pay at a local car wash. With the bravado of a young man, Daniel went to the company boss and made his request and was chased off the property with a gun. He and the unpaid worker slouched back to the center.

Daniel realized that from that moment he would be walking with immigrants for the rest of his life. He attended Princeton Theological Seminary and received a call to a 210-member church with people born in more than 20 countries. Since then he has lived in communities with immigrant majorities; and two of his three children and a foster child are immigrants.

In walking alongside immigrants he discovered a deep spirituality rooted in the biblical tradition. Adam and Eve's dismissal from the Garden of Eden is an immigration/refugee story. They are banished from their homeland. One can say that the entire salvation history of the Bible and human history is a quest to go back to the garden.

I cannot tell the entire biblical story of immigration so I shall tell one extended Old Testament story and provide extracts from the New Testament. With an immigration-consciousness, this is how one might read the Bible.

First, we turn to the history of the Hebrew people with the call of Abram and Sarai (later known as Abraham and Sarah). Obedient to God's calling they embark on a life of migration that leads them from the city of Ur (near modern-day Baghdad), through Canaan (modern-day Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories), into Egypt, and eventually back into Canaan, where they settle in Hebron, a city in what today is called the Occupied West Bank.

For three generations the family of Abraham lives in Canaan as immigrants. They do not adopt the language or culture of the local populace: instead they continue to worship the God who had called them to the pilgrimage path of an immigrant life. When it comes time for their sons and heirs to marry, they send them back to Mesopotamia to find wives from the "old country."

In perhaps the most gripping and compelling of the Bible's immigrant narratives, Abraham's great-grandson, Joseph, who is kidnapped by jealous brothers and sold into slavery, becomes a victim of what today we would call "human trafficking."

Like many immigrants, Joseph becomes successful through a combination of hard work, good luck, and more than a pinch of heaven's favor. Eventually, after working his way up from slavery to a position of chief advisor to the Egyptian pharaoh, Joseph finds reconciliation with his brothers through his success as an immigrant. This enables him to sponsor his extended family's immigration to Egypt, where they prosper and become numerous.

As is the case with many prosperous and populous immigrant minorities, the Hebrew living in Egypt eventually become victims of the majority population's fear and paranoia. With an appeal to "homeland security," the Egyptians enslave the descendants of Abraham. The story is told in Exodus 1:8-14:

"Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.' Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them."

Responding to the suffering of the Hebrew people, God once again calls them to make a pilgrimage of immigration, this time led by Moses through the waters of the sea, across the Sinai desert and back to Canaan, where a promised land awaits them.

And the Jewish narrative of migration continues through conquest or what some have called a peasant revolt, through Israeli monarchy, division, idolatry, unfaithfulness and exile in Babylon and return.

Although the books of the New Testament are not primarily concerned with the immigration of a particular people, the immigration spirituality of the Jewish Bible continues into the Christian scriptures.

This immigrant spirituality is reflected, for example, in the Christmas story as recorded in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus' first visitors are foreign Magi who cross political borders to adore the Christ child and to offer him gifts. In the next chapter, Jesus and his parents spend time as refugees in Egypt, having been driven out of their homeland for fear of King Herod's violence.

In many ways, this story demonstrates divine solidarity with the Gospel of Matthew's first Christian readers, who like all Jews, suffered displacement in the aftermath of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.

In Luke's version of the Christmas story, Jesus' family is portrayed as migrants, traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem while Mary is "great with child." When Jesus is born, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger, he is worshipped first by shepherds who probably were nomads, and may or may not

have been Jewish. As in Matthew's Gospel, Luke's telling of the Christmas story places the birth of Jesus in the context of migration.

And so we go through the New Testament with immigration eyes and we recognize situations and words in new ways. Both Paul and Peter contended that Christians were called to an immigrant spiritual life in that believers, though they are residents of earthly realms, are citizens of a heavenly realm and must live lives that reflect and commend that citizenship.

Peter writes: "Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge." (1 Peter 2:11-12).

Ben Daniel has the last word. He writes: "At this moment in history, as immigration issues dominate the American political landscape, Christians living in the United States will do well to reexamine the biblical witness to a God who calls God's people to live an immigrant spirituality, to follow the pilgrimage of an immigrant's journey, and to respond with compassion to the needs of those who have made their way to our shores in search of safety from persecution or to take advantage of opportunities to live a better life.

"The biblical witness points to a God who walks an immigrant path. Given the testimony of Scriptures, it is reasonable to assume that God may send an angel...to accompany and to protect undocumented migrants as they cross the southern border of the United States. It is even more likely to assume that God calls living people of faith to welcome immigrants with compassionate hospitality – as Christians have done throughout history." Amen.