

Our God is a God of Refuge
Mississauga Mennonite Church
June 10, 2007

Scripture Readings: Hosea 4:1-4; 7:1-2; 12:8-9
Matthew 25: 31-40

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt.” Our God is a God of refuge. The Exodus from Egypt is a defining moment in the history of the people of Israel. In this moment, God stands on the side of the oppressed, liberating them from slavery and from the unjust massacre of innocents. Through the Exodus, God leads a refugee people into a new land.

Like the people of Israel, Mennonites have experienced God as a God of refuge. As Mennonites fled religious persecution in Europe and in Russia, they were comforted to know that they were not alone in that refugee experience. God went before them and with them in their search for religious freedom, peace and prosperity in a new land. Our faith and our history calls us to solidarity with refugees, with all those who – still today – find themselves forced to flee their homes and journey to a new land in search of life and liberty. (June – Refugee Day)

We read in the book of Hosea of a land where “bloodshed follows bloodshed,” where “the land mourns and all who live in it waste away.” We are reminded of many lands in deep mourning today – Iraq, Colombia, Sudan. Lands in mourning produce a people in mourning – refugees mourning for loved ones lost or left behind in the violence, refugees mourning for what their land and their lives once were – and never will be again.

Our reading this morning speaks of God's desire to heal Israel. But what does it mean to heal a land and a people in mourning? First, it means an indictment of those causing the suffering. We read: “Whenever I would heal Israel, the sins of Ephraim are exposed.” Sometimes, the media leads us to believe that far-away lands in mourning suffer merely as a result of their own sins. Iraq prepares weapons of mass destruction, Colombia propagates drug use. Africa cannot control its own violence.

But the encounter with refugees brings us face to face with the suffering of innocent people and calls us to take a second look at the causes of that suffering. I think of Zakia, an Iraqi mother separated from her children many years ago when she fled as a refugee first to Turkey and then to Canada. Years later, Zakia now fears for her son. In January, her home town was devastated by bombing. A group of young men, including Zakia's son, was rounded up for questioning by US soldiers. No evidence was found to connect the young men to the bombing – their only crime was that of being young Arab Muslim men. After his release, Zakia's son was also harrassed by militants, suspicious of what he might have told the US soldiers, and anxious to recruit him to their cause. Caught in the middle of a war he does not want to fight, Zakia's son fled to Syria.

Often, we are closer to the causes of violence than we like to admit. How much does the

suffering of this young refugee have to do with the forces of violence in his own country, and how much is it related to Western stereotypes of the Muslim terrorist? How much is it related to the price of gas for the car I drive? It's easy to shake off the blame and say that the war in Iraq is a US war, not a Canadian one. But how much indirect support has Canada given to the US war in Iraq by taking on a larger role in Afghanistan?

We are closer to the causes of suffering than we like to admit. I think of Isabel, a Mexican mother who took her children and fled after her own husband tried to kill her. After years of suffering domination and violence, Isabel could take it no longer. She came to Canada in search of a new life. Here, however, her refugee case was rejected because she had not gone to the Mexican police to ask for protection. Never mind that the police don't take domestic violence very seriously in Mexico. Never mind that police corruption is widespread. Isabel's case was rejected. Now Isabel is faced with making a submission for a Pre-Removal Risk Assessment, knowing that most of these cases are rejected as well. "It's such a cold system," she said to me the other day, fighting back tears. How many people are denied compassion by our immigration system because their suffering does not fit a narrow definition of what it means to be a refugee?

One part of the task of healing lands and people in mourning is raising our voices to condemn the causes of injustice and violence – whether they are rooted in human rights abuses abroad, or in unfair policies right here in Canada. But the important work of healing does not end here. We read in the book of Matthew: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in."

Much of the work of the New Life Centre is about helping refugees and immigrants with a wide variety of practical needs. Settlement workers offer newcomers assistance with immigration issues, helping them through the often intimidating steps to file a refugee claim or sponsor a family member abroad. They may help with finding a doctor, a school, or an apartment. Settlement workers advocate for their clients, making a phone call or writing a letter to the landlord or social worker who only speaks English.

Settlement work is also about building relationships, building community. Settlement workers extend practical support, but also friendship. For some newcomers, far away from family and friends, the New Life Centre becomes a home away from home. Vivian lived for many months in the house next door to the New Life Centre. Regularly, she would visit the Centre to ask for help, or to volunteer her time in the childminding area. When Vivian got engaged, the New Life Centre staff organized a bridal shower to help her celebrate this special milestone in her life.

"I was a stranger and you invited me in." When I did an MCC term in El Salvador, I lived at first with another MCC worker. When she finished her term early, a Salvadoran family invited me in, suggesting that it was not safe for me to be on my own. I was embraced as part of the family, sharing bedtime stories with the children, confidences with my friend Vilma, and political discussions with her partner Lito. In many ways, the friendship of this family was the highlight of my time in El Salvador. Their generosity in inviting me

in calls me to offer a sincere and generous welcome to those arriving in my country.

All of us have experiences of being welcomed into community. Our faith in a God of refuge, our Mennonite history of migration, and our own experiences of being the stranger invited into a new community, all of these call us to solidarity with refugees and other newcomers. In a multicultural city, we have many opportunities to reach out to newcomers – in our neighbourhoods, our places of work, our church community.

We'd also like to invite you – as individuals, and as a congregation - to take advantage of opportunities to build relationships with newcomers through the New Life Centre. We're currently working on a number of new projects that offer opportunities for building stronger connections between our supporting churches and the people we serve. This summer, we'll be launching a new and improved website. Part of this website will be a section highlighting newcomer stories, worship resources and advocacy documents. We hope that this will be a resource for churches who are seeking to build awareness of refugee concerns or to raise their voices to condemn injustice and call for change. We'll also continue to communicate advocacy initiatives through Lyle, as your representative on our Board.

Another new initiative is a Job Coaching Program. Many newcomers face significant barriers to finding meaningful work. Foreign credentials and experience are not recognized by many employers and newcomers often struggle just to get their foot in the door. The purpose of the Job Coaching Program would be to match newcomers with Canadian Job Coaches already employed in the same or a similar field of work. The role of the job coach would be to provide encouragement and support, information about licensing requirements and training, and connections to networking opportunities. We hope that some of you might be interested in participating in a training workshop and volunteering your time as job coaches. We'll be talking more about this initiative during the adult Sunday school class after the service.

“I was a stranger and you invited me in.” The Bible teaches us that we are all strangers and sojourners in a land that ultimately belongs to God and God alone. As fellow sojourners, let us walk together humbly, justly and compassionately. With our sisters and brothers from around the world, let us build communities of peace, of understanding, and of unity in diversity.