

Remember Your Journey From Shittim To Gilgal: Welcoming The Immigrant And Refugee – Erika Spring

Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

When I was in seminary, I taught second and third grade Sunday School at a local church. One morning, we were reading Isaiah 11:6. You have all probably heard this text. The prophet Isaiah says that the wolf will lay down with the lamb, the leopard will lay down with the goat, and the calf and the lion will lay down together. After reading this verse, I looked around at my second and third graders and asked them if they had any questions. One little girl raised her hand and asked, “If the lion normally eats other animals, but is going to lay down with them peacefully... does that mean when the Kingdom of God comes, we are all going to be vegetarians?”

Needless to say, I was shocked by the question. What eight-year-old thinks of these things? All of my theological training had not prepared me for that question. So instead I smiled and used a pastor-trick. That’s right, I’m going to tell you a trick that every pastor has used when they don’t know how to answer a question...so keep a look out for when your pastor says this to you in the future. I looked at her and said, “That’s a great question. What does everyone else think?”

I share this story with you today not because the question of vegetarianism has anything to do with our lectionary texts. I share it because that question was asked by an eight-year-old Indonesian girl named Crista who was born in the United States, but whose father was an undocumented immigrant. She made our class think about the Bible in a new way that morning.

The lectionary text I’d like to focus on today is the one we read right at the beginning of the service—Micah 6:1-8. It’s the site of one of the most famous verses of the Old Testament – where the prophet says to *do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God*. I’m sure you all know the verse. And we will eventually get to talking about that verse, but first I’d like to explore the verses before it. Because while preparing for this sermon this week, I learned quite a lot about this chapter from Micah that I did not previously know.

For example, the setting of this text is a courtroom. The chapter begins with the prophet announcing a case between God and the people of Israel. The people of Israel have broken their covenant with God, and they are on trial as the defendant. In the earlier chapters of Micah, the wrongs of the people of Israel were laid out: those with power had seized fields and homes and taken them away, they had committed violence against the poor, and politicians and religious leaders were taking bribes. This covenant-breaking has led to a fracture in the relationship between God and Israel. The prophet says, *The Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel*.

Verses three through five are spoken by God to the people. It’s in these verses that God reminds the people of Israel of what God has done for them. God brought them out of Egypt and redeemed them from slavery. God sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to them to be leaders. God bestowed a blessing on them through Balaam. And God led them *from Shittim to Gilgal*, crossing through the Jordan River, and into the Promised Land.

The word *remember* is used here in verse 5 in reference to the Israelites' journey from Shittim to Gilgal. This is the journey into the Promised Land. God encourages the Israelites to remember, because they seem to have forgotten. They seem to have forgotten the covenant, the character of God, and they seem to have forgotten how they are supposed to be in this world. They are encouraged to *remember*, not only in mind, but in action. *Remember* what the Lord has done for you, and let that remembering change how you live. *Remember* the blessings God has bestowed upon you, and let that remembering empower you to go out and bless others. *Remember* the journey *from Shittim to Gilgal*. *Remember* that God led you out of a country that was enslaving you, mistreating you, endangering you—and led you to a land of promise and freedom. *Remember* leaving Egypt in search of the Promised Land. *Remember* you are a people of exodus. *Remember* leaving persecution in search of some peace. *Remember* leaving slavery, traveling over mountains and rivers, traveling for days and nights and weeks and months, to a place where you hoped for a better future. You hoped for safety. You hoped for sustenance. You hoped for a place to work, eat, and play with your family. *Remember*. *Remember* that I, the Lord, have done this for you, and let that remembering change how you live.

I heard these echoes of *Remember* this week as I read about our new president's most recent executive order, called the "Protection of the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the U.S." Among other things, this order immediately stopped Syrian refugees from entering our country indefinitely, suspended refugee admissions for 120 days, and capped the total number of refugees who can be admitted at 50,000 per year (down from 110,000). Then, just last night, a national stay was granted and deportations were halted on all those in transit and who were detained at airports. This is a victory—an important one—and it must be celebrated. But at the same time, the ban on future entry of refugees still exists. People who are fleeing war-torn countries, people who are escaping poverty and persecution, people who are looking for safety and a new beginning, will be turned away. The stranger, the outcast, the foreigner—our country has decided that there is no place for them here.

Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal.

After God reminds the Israelites of what God has done for them, the Israelites respond with questions. They want to know what God is requiring from them. Should they bow down? Give burnt offerings? One thousand rams, ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Finally the Israelites ask one last hyperbolic question: should they offer their firstborn child in order to please God? Their last question is over the top. It's a question about how far they have to go in order to please God. Is anything good enough? Burnt offerings, rams, oil, firstborn children? What will it take to please God?

God responds in what is the famous verse that we all know so well. What God requires of us is to *do justice*, practice loving *kindness*, and *walk humbly with God*.

Remember what the Lord has done for you. Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal, from slavery to the promised land. And do justice.

Many of you know that I went to college at Greenville College, and now I am back working there. But in between my graduation and start as an employee, I went to graduate school in New Jersey. While there, I worked at a church in Highland Park, New Jersey, as the coordinator of parts of their immigration ministry. This church had a long history of standing up for the rights

of immigrants and refugees. Every week, we traveled to an immigration jail and visited with people who were being detained there. I met a woman named Dorna from El Salvador. She had been living in the United States for many years with her husband and two children. Her whole family had been detained, but all of them were released while Dorna continued to be held for eight months. While in detention, she had a stroke and developed heart problems, which made her unable to work, and was suffering from PTSD. Despite having a lawyer, and family in the United States, she lost her case and was deported. I sat with her as she cried about her fears, her loss of hope, her uncertainty about what to do. Her family remains in the United States.

Around the same time that I met Dorna, I also met a man named Isaac from Nigeria. He left his country because he was in danger of persecution, physical beatings, and imprisonment; upon fleeing to the United States, he was detained for months. He had no family in our country, knew no one, and had nowhere to go—but, with his lawyer, he won his case. A few friends and myself picked Isaac up from detention on a cold night in January, and brought him to our church, where he lived for a few weeks while we worked on finding housing for him. He helped out at our church's affordable café, washing dishes and serving customers, worked at our local thrift shop, shoveled our church's parking lot, and joined our Gospel Choir. Eventually, he moved into a house with one of our congregants who had an open bedroom and got a job at Robert Wood Johnson hospital only a few blocks away. Isaac is a thriving member of my church's congregation and actively contributing to the local community.

Both Dorna and Isaac's stories are examples of our country's broken immigration system. And though our country may treat them differently because they are from other countries, look differently, or speak different languages, as Christians we are called to see past these boundaries and differences. Our country sees immigrants and refugees as "other," as "them," as "not us." As Christians, we must work against any "us" versus "them" rhetoric.

Christian writer and pastor Brian Zahnd, in his recent book A Farewell to Mars, writes, "Jesus brings us the truth that will set us free. The truth is that our enemies are really our alienated brothers. The truth is there is no them—there is only us." In Jesus, there is only the call to do no wrong to a neighbor, as our Psalm 15 lectionary text says. In Jesus, there is only the call *to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God* as our Micah 6 text says. In Jesus, there is only the call to look for the poor, the mourning, the meek, for *theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven*, as our Matthew 5 text says. All of our lectionary texts today call out for a remembering and a justice that is based on *the least of these*.

In Christ, we are called to do upside-down things. We are called to pray for our enemies, to be a servant, to forgive seventy times seven, to welcome the outsider, and to put the last first. These are not things that make sense to the world, to our culture, or to our country. We are called, in Christ, to an alternative standing—an alternative way of living—a way of living in the Kingdom of God that may at times be at odds with the kingdoms of this world. We are called to do justice and practice loving kindness for the least of these, which includes the immigrant and refugee.

There is a song, written and performed by members of the church that I mentioned earlier, that I'd like to play for you today. It's called "Last Are First." I encourage you to spend some time in thought and prayer as the song plays. (...)

So what do we do in order to do justice and practice loving kindness? I want to encourage you, personally, or us, collectively as a church, to choose one thing. There are so many ways to get involved in welcoming the stranger that it can be overwhelming to know where to begin. I have two concrete suggestions for us today. The first is to get involved in an organization called International Institute of St. Louis—financially, or with your time as a volunteer. Many of you know of this organization. The Institute offers services to refugees and immigrants in the city of St. Louis, from job placement to English classes to counseling. They have resettled over 20,000 refugees in their time as an organization, 595 of which were in the year 2014. They fiercely welcome “the other” and base their operations on the idea of the last being first—the immigrant and refugee are priority. My second suggestion is to begin visitations at the immigration detention jail in Mount Vernon, Illinois. About one hour away, this facility houses many immigrants who are awaiting trial, without family and friends and resources, with open visitation nights to anyone with a state-issued ID.

As we close our service today and go out into our community this week, I encourage us all to consider welcoming the immigrant and refugee. Remember the Israelites’ journey from Shittim to Gilgal. Remember what God has done for us, and let that change how we live in the world. Do justice. Practice loving kindness. Welcome the stranger.