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Immigration: Old Testament (Gen. 1:26-27; 12:1-10; Deut. 24:17-32)

Last Sunday we were gifted with the sermon by Saulo Padilla. Saulo shared his own story of migration and called us to intentionally welcome and build relationships with our neighbors. This morning we want to step back from the immediate context of immigration in Elkhart County and put on a wider lens for our camera as we consider the topic of immigration. Now as we put on our wider lenses we still need to determine what do we focus on within the viewfinder of our camera? We know that the topic of immigration is a relevant and timely topic for us to be considering here at Waterford. A large group gathered here on Wednesday evening for our first evening of “Conversations that Matter.” The buzz and energy of the room, without even knowing what was being said, indicated that there was great engagement on this topic. We also must recognize that this topic is much, much bigger than our current context of Elkhart County. The United Nations estimates that there are over 220 million people migrating worldwide!

So, what do we put in our viewfinder as the starting point in this broad and vast topic of immigration? Often conversations begin with focusing on the need to maintain national borders, or focusing on the current immigration laws. However, either of these as a starting point leads us to focus on issues of national security or concerns circulating around legality. In the midst of searching for something to focus on in our viewfinder we must remember our primary identity as beloved children of God. As people of God we look to the Bible as a place of inspiration, guidance, and as the Word of God still relevant for us today.

So, now we have put the Bible in our camera’s viewfinder. And we know that today we want to focus in on the Old Testament. Well, where in the Old Testament do we zoom in to

begin? Well, I think it is fitting to begin in the beginning. Why start to tell the story in the middle of the story? So we begin clear back in Genesis chapter 1 with the amazing and miraculous story of creation.

In verse 26 of chapter 1 we are told that on the sixth day God said ““Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So, God created human beings in God’s own image, in the image of God, God created them; male and female God created them.” In our viewfinder we zoom in on the foundational basis of truth that all humans are made in the image of God. All humans, made in God’s image. As we zoom into this truth then we begin the conversation about immigration not on the topic of national security, or legal statues, but on the basis that all human are made in the image of God. Focusing here clearly highlights that “Every person has special worth... it makes plain that outsiders are also created in the divine image. They, too, are valuable in God’s sight and worthy of regard.”ⁱ

Jeremiah and Lydia, our two youngest children who will be 3 on Christmas, had the privilege this fall of beginning Sunday School with Char Stoltzfus and Becky Yoder are their teachers. It was not too long into the fall that they came home and began singing the song “I am special.” It is a song that Char has taught each of our children as they were in her toddler class. Lydia and Jeremiah go around loudly and proudly singing “I am special, yes very, very special. God made me!” While this is cute and endearing, the more profound part is that Char and Becky have taught our young children to sing this song about others. So they are as eager to name others that they know and sing the song for them, just as loudly and joyfully – “Johnnie is special, yes very very special, God made Johnnie!” In the small world of my almost 3 year olds

they are being formed to understand and celebrate that they are made by God, and that God made all human beings... and I hope that they never forget this important truth.

As we focus on immigration we must never lose sight that we are talking about real people, with real stories, and real individuals who like us are created in the image of God. We do not begin by talking about policies, laws, procedures... we begin by talking about people and celebrating the shared humanity found in us all.

If we were to broaden our viewfinder to encapsulate the entire Old Testament we would be able to quickly detect that migration is a fundamental theme of the Bible. Last week Saulo even went as far as to say that we need to see the bible and the biblical narratives through the lens of migration. Turning now to chapter 12 in Genesis we came to the familiar passage often referred to as the Call of Abram. Here we read God's instructions to Abram and Sarai to leave all that is familiar and become migrants. Whenever I have studied this passage I am always amazed at how Abram responds to the Lord's calling. The Lord says to Abram Go, leave your country, your people, all that is familiar and loved and just go and I will eventually show you where you are headed. How does Abram respond? We are told in verse 4 "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him." What?! Had this calling come to me I would have had a long, long list of follow up questions for God! And yet Abram and Sarai are trusting that this new journey, this new life, will take them from barrenness to blessing. Abraham and Sarah faithfully set out, leaving their homeland, and end up being migrants their entire lives.

Abraham and Sarah are not the only ones in the Old Testament who experience migration. In fact, it is far easier to find people in the Old Testament who experienced life as migrants, than to find those who did not. The biblical story of God's people in the Old Testament showcase a people that are on the move. In the Old Testament people immigrated and migrated

because of hunger, forced exile, political conquest – similar reasons why today people migrate to new lands and new communities.

Old Testament Scholar Daniel Carroll summarizes some of the stories of migration in the Old Testament. Listen for the various reasons why individuals migrate, as well as the extensive list of those who experience migration within their life story.

Terah leaves Ur and goes to Haran, and Abram subsequently migrates from there to Canaan. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, along with their families, leave their homes to settle temporarily in different places because of the lack of food, in Egypt, the Negev, and Philistia. In other words, the history of Abram and his descendants is one born of migration. Other Old Testament figures are forced from their homes. Jacob flees Esau and lives for a time in Aram with Laban and his family. Joseph is betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery. Moses escapes from Egypt to avoid prosecution for killing someone... Centuries later, thousands are taken into exile to Mesopotamia when Israel falls to Assyria in the eighth century B.C., and Judah to Babylon in the sixth century.ⁱⁱ Let us not forget the familiar stories of Daniel, Esther, Nehemiah, Ruth, Naomi, and the list could go on. The story of God's people is a story of people on the move.

“The more one studies this topic, the more it becomes evident that the Old Testament is in part a collection of the stories of migrants and displaced peoples. It demonstrates that migration is not a new thing, but very much a reality in the ancient world as well.”ⁱⁱⁱ Not only is migration not a new thing, but it is so much a part of the story of God's people that it becomes central to their identity, their relationship to God, and their relationships with others around them.

In the Old Testament there are various Hebrew words used when discussing the immigrant or sojourner with the most important term being *ger*. The prevalence of both the experience of God's people as sojourners, as well as the prevalent experience of God's people hosting sojourners had led for this word to be used 92 times in the Old Testament.

Our last scripture passage this morning comes from the section of laws in Deuteronomy which formulate how God's people are to relate to the foreigners or sojourners in their midst. Now before we revisit these laws we must also remember that "The sojourner (ger) in the Old Testament... was a vulnerable individual, classified with widows, orphans, and the poor as Israel's most at-risk persons. In the ancient world... the extended family had to be the primary resource in times of need. The difficulty for outsiders was that they were separated from these kinship networks... In an agrarian peasant society, like Israel's, the sojourner, then, was at the mercy of others for provision, work, and protection."^{iv}

This morning I chose to highlight the laws found in Deuteronomy, however, we could also have also turned to places in Exodus or Leviticus. Here in Deuteronomy chapter 24 we could back up to verse 14 and also read "Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is an Israelite or is a foreigner (ger) residing in one of your towns." Then moving down to verse 17. "Do not deprive the foreigner (ger) or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge."

Now, here's a significant question as we consider the Old Testament as well as our current context in relationship to immigration: What are the reasons God interjects these laws about the sojourners into the laws for God's people? And not just once, but repeatedly God calls God's people to care for and extend hospitality to the foreigner, the widow, and the orphan. In his book "Christians at the Border" Old Testament scholar Daniel Carroll argues that there are three reasons as outlined in the biblical text.

First, these laws are included for God's people because they too had once been sojourners. Here in Deuteronomy chapter 24 verse 18 we hear the reminder and the rationale for why they should follow these laws with the sojourners in their midst: "Remember that you were

slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this.” God is reminding them and us, once you were strangers in a foreign land and I took care of you, now extend that care and welcome and hospitality to others. It gets back to the first Sunday in this series when Pastor Neil shared that the root word for hospitality means both guest and host. We have been hosted, so we host. We have been the sojourner, so we reach out to those sojourning.

Secondly, Carroll asserts that we are to take seriously God’s command in Leviticus 19:18 to love your neighbor as yourself. Next Sunday Neil will pick up on immigration in the New Testament where we know that Jesus names this as the second greatest commandment, right after Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and strength. This commandment does not say to love people like you, who speak the same language, come from the same extended family tree, have the same skin color, or the same culture. Instead it says loves your neighbor as yourself.

Finally, “the third and the most serious and profound incentive to care for sojourners was to be found in the person of God. In reminding Israel of its history and the obligations that stemmed from it, the Lord explains that the redemption from their horrific experiences as immigrants also revealed something important about (God’s) own person: God loves the helpless, among whom (God) lists the sojourners.”^v Stating it succinctly, God’s people both then and now, are to love and care for the sojourner because God does.

The Old Testament is filled with stories of God’s people on the move and stories of God’s people hosting and welcoming others who are also on the move. Migration or immigration is not new in our time today. Instead, it is something that has been part of the story of humanity, and especially the story of God’s people, from the beginning.

As we zoom back into our current context of today in Elkhart County I challenge us to begin the conversation of immigration with the reminder and celebration that all humans are created in God's image. I pray that we may join the children in declaring that all are special and loved and cherished as they are made in the image of God. Secondly I challenge us to continue to strive to resonate with the life of God's people in the Old Testament who experienced life as sojourners. In the spirit of my sermon two weeks ago from 1st Peter, may we never lose sight that our citizenship is in heaven. This identity leads us to not grasp at our possessions, property, wealth, communities with a sense of entitlement. Instead it will propel us to live into the Old Testament laws that commanded us to help care for the sojourners in our midst.

Last week Saulo gave us some practical suggestions on how to care for the immigrants in our community. I would summarize it with the law in Leviticus that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. We tend to our physical needs of clothing, shelter, and food. We seek to secure healthcare and education and provide for human rights for ourselves. As we love the immigrants in our midst may we tend to their needs as our own. May we greet others and be willing to walk this journey with them, inviting them into our hearts, homes, communities, and being willing to respond to their invitations into theirs.

Immigrants are special, very, very special, because each of them are made and loved by God. May we extend gracious and radical hospitality as ones who too are made in the image of God.

May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ M. Daniel Carroll R., *MissioDei: Immigration and the Bible* (Mennonite Mission Network: Elkhart, Indiana), 6.

ⁱⁱ Carroll, *MissioDei*, 6-7.

ⁱⁱⁱ Carroll, *MissioDei*, 10.

^{iv} Carroll, *MissioDei*, 10.

^v M. Daniel Carroll R., *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, & the Bible* (Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, Michigan), 91.