

Refuge

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Psalm 46
Isaiah 25:1-8

Twenty years ago this month I preached my first sermon in this congregation. The occasion was my return from East Africa, where I had gone for five weeks to be a tourist and visit friends who were serving with Mennonite Central Committee.

It was the summer of 1990 and there was talk of an attempted coup in Kenya. Travel was somewhat precarious and one did not dare give the peace sign because it was a clear threat to the ruling party. Rather than “peace,” two raised fingers meant that you were in favor of a two party system.

I can't find a copy of the sermon I preached that August Sunday, but I recall that I chose not to speak about fear or poverty, of which I saw plenty, but on hospitality. I had lived in Washington, D.C., for four years and had been working in the hospitality industry (I worked in restaurants for many years). I was experienced at serving and welcoming people, but the welcome I received in Kenya, in Zambia, in Malawi was unmatched. It was more generous and more genuine than what I had seen visitors to this country receive. It was a kind of “more with less” hospitality and it left an impression on me that I have not been able to shake.

Hospitality is a spiritual gift that I am continually nurturing in myself, and it is a practice that we as a congregation consciously cultivate and work toward. It is what many people look for in a church home. We have not yet invited

Churchrater.com to visit and give us an official rating so we don't know definitively, but anecdotally we seem to have increased our awareness of and capacity for hospitality over the past decade.

Each of our "summer conversations" the past weeks have begun with a reading from Psalm 46. *God is our refuge and our strength.* After reading this Psalm numerous times, I began to ask "Does this have anything to do with hospitality? Are we to be not only hospitable but also a refuge?"

The Psalmist often refers to God as a refuge from the troubles of the world: earthquakes, storms, wars. Isaiah 25 describes God as a refuge for the poor: a shelter from the elements, safety from tyrants and those who would cause harm.

A concrete example of refuge is found in Numbers, chapter 35. The Promised Land is being divided up for the tribes of Israel. The tribes each get a parcel of land — except for the Levites. They do not get a large tract of land; they receive six cities, six cities of refuge. These cities, located throughout the other tribal lands, are to be places of safety for those who need protection. Apparently life was unpredictable, and one might accidentally kill a neighbor. If it was indeed unintentional, then the city of refuge was a safe place to go so that one was not killed in response to the first killing. As long as the guilty party stayed in the city of refuge, they were safe.

Today when we think of refuge, we immediately think of refugees. There are an estimated 10-12 million refugees worldwide. This rough figure does not include those who are internally displaced in their own countries, like the

members of our sister church, Remanso de Paz, in Colombia. The guesstimate of internally displaced people is 12-24 million worldwide with almost 4 million in Colombia alone.

We are among those who do not have to seek refuge, at least from war. Some of us may have sought refuge from the heat this week when the power went out. We must acknowledge that while we say we are safe from war, there is certainly violence on local streets from which many seek refuge. And we note, often with silent horror, that even homes and churches cannot be counted on to be safe sanctuaries from violence.

So what is the difference between hospitality and refuge? Is hospitality what we give with a big smile on our faces because we are eager to please or make new friends? Is it what we are obligated to give? As an East African friend wrote to me this week, "It is shame not to give enough food to visitors." While there may be a genuine inward pull and even the spiritual gift to be hospitable, there is also an outward custom and obligation.

With refuge there is an urgency. It is not just a matter of etiquette, but an ethical obligation. The International Guest House, sponsored by this congregation, provides splendid hospitality, but rarely is it called on to be a refuge for asylum seekers. Refuge is a deep need, and while hospitality is a spiritual gift, refuge is a spiritual need that can feel almost impossible to fill. Perhaps that is why God is described as our refuge. The need feels so great that it seems only God can fill it.

Years ago, naturalist and poet, Terry Tempest Williams, published a book titled *Refuge: an unnatural history of family and place*. It was 1983 in Utah, her mother was dying of cancer and the Great Salt Lake was rising to record levels. Tempest Williams movingly weaves together the story of her mother's illness and death with the illness and what seems the dying of the land and its migratory birds. Tempest Williams is seeking refuge from the death that pursues the women in her family, all of whom die of breast cancer, leaving her the matriarch at 34 years of age.

She writes: *I am slowly, painfully discovering that my refuge is not found in my mother, my grandmother or even the birds of Bear River. My refuge exists in my capacity to love. If I can learn to love death, then I can begin to find refuge in change.*

This is not what we expect when we think of refuge — change. We say God is a rock; God is our refuge. That means constant and unchanging, rock solid, never to be moved. And yet as the aphorism goes, “the only constant is change.”

If the old saying is true, “nothing endures but change” how can we possibly find refuge there? How can we hold onto what is not? How can we live and move and have our being in change? It is true that we cannot escape change, but is that where God is found? We cannot fully understand God, but can we find our home in the inexplicable?

In our highly developed and technological culture, the goal is to have total comprehension. We have books with titles like *The Theory of Everything*

(Stephen Hawking), The Theory of Almost Everything (Robert Oerter), New Theories of Everything (John D. Barrow) and Thinking About Almost Everything (Ash Amin and Michael O'Neill).

We want to know it all. We are often uncomfortable not knowing what the future holds, what our relationship is to another person or institution. Ambiguity is hard to live with, and the idea that God is an unchanging rock is something to hold onto. I will always remember what long time member Sally White told me about faith. She said she had always imagined that as one got older having and practicing faith would get easier. She found that not to be the case. Perhaps the ambiguities do not get easier to live with.

We are, after all, people of faith — not people of certainty. What we call our refuge, the thing in which we place our hope, has no boundaries. It is not quantifiable. We have only metaphors and images to describe our refuge. If Tempest Williams is right, then our refuge is in finding ways to love, in finding ways to live with the change that is all around us.

When I started this sermon, I thought refuge meant immigrants and immigration, perhaps a follow up to Pastor Mechak's story last week about his life in Congo and Rwanda.

Or refuge would be an opportunity to weave in the current controversy in Mennonite Church USA: whether or not to have the 2013 convention in Arizona, home of tough immigration law SB 1070. Iglesia Menonita Hispana is calling for a boycott of Arizona and my friends Hugo Saucedo and Felipe Hinojosa are calling for a cancellation of the 2013 convention all together.

I thought that talking about refuge would lead to some show of solidarity with those who seek refuge and find none. I had the notion that refuge and hospitality are intricately entwined; that I would somehow discover that the strength of God is God's ability to shelter us gently.

Then I read some poems by refugees.

One Night, By Alwaiya Mudhir, age 14, from Somalia

*One night I left my home
Our whole life changed
Old men coughing
The next thing I could
remember was
That it was a very dark night
We were very bored
traveling place to place
WHEN ARE WE EVER GOING
TO STOP & SIT!!!*

from A Refugee Song by Otieno Amisi, Kenya.

*Oh my countrymen
Hear this my cry
To each and everyone
Take away the tears
from the eyes of the children
And fear from their sunken hearts
Wipe away the blood
From the face of the stars
The color on the blades of grass:
Let it be a dewy green
And let the children play on the green scene
Beat your swords into ploughshares,
I want a new life.*

*I want to go back home
I want to go back
and regain my identity
I want to go back*

*and re-till my land
I want to go back
and re-build my fences
I want to go back
and re live my life
I want to go back
and praise my God.
Wipe away the blood from the face of the stars. Re-till the land.*

A place to “STOP & SIT,” to praise God.

How do we at once acknowledge the importance of the concrete — home, safety, food, clothing, farming, education, blood, tears — while at the same time recognizing that this is only a partial picture. There is all that which we cannot see, which we cannot hold – blood on the face of the stars, the praise of God.

It is that which we cannot grasp - the change, the mystery of the incomprehensible - that we must learn to love and find as refuge. It is the God that we cannot know that we must learn to love.

Out of this mystery we are pushed back to housing and food, boycotts and protests even as we are drawn into the questions and ambiguities. *God is our refuge and our strength Be still and know that I am God.*

May we be drawn *into* the love that we seek, and the refuge for which our hearts long. May we live *out* the hospitality to which it calls us. May we share this Great Mystery with all.