

# “The Ultimate Immigration Handbook”

[May 2, 2010]

by Shelly Davis

Text: Matthew 25:31-40

Consider this:

“The Bible begins with the migration of God’s spirit and ends with John in exile on the Isle of Patmos – between those two events the uprooted people of God seek safety, sanctuary and refuge.”

These words are the author’s own summary from a work in progress entitled, *The Bible as the Ultimate Immigration Handbook: Written by, for, and about migrants, immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers* written by Rev. Joan M. Maruskin, a one-time Washington representative for the Church World Service Immigration and Refugee Program.

Maruskin opens her work with this brief reflection:

“In the beginning all was darkness and void and the spirit of God moved (migrated) over the face of the chaos.” (Genesis 1:1) To move is to migrate. The Biblical story is a migration story. The Bible begins with God’s spirit migrating over the face of the water, followed by God, who after creating the birds, fish, and animals (all who migrate) moved throughout creation looking for a caretaker for this world.

We are all migrants on the face of this earth. Take a moment and consider your personal migration.

- Are you where you were born?
- Have you moved and if so for what reason?
- How many times have you moved?
- Many of us move by choice, others by necessity and others by force.

Humankind's story is a migration story. We all are, or have been, migrants, immigrants, refugees, or asylum seekers.<sup>1</sup>

If you heard or watched or read any news this week you know that the governor of the state of Arizona, Jan Brewer, signed a new piece of legislation—SB 1070—that has reignited a firestorm in our nation’s immigration debate. “For the issue of immigration, Arizona could turn out to be “the Alabama of 1963,” said Robert Creamer in *Huffingtonpost.com*. (The Week, May 7, 2010 Volume 10 Issue 4362, p. 4)

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<sup>1</sup> from a work in progress by Joan M. Maruskin  
Church World Service Immigration and Refugee Program, Washington Representative.  
Parts have been presented in churches and national conferences since 1994.  
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One month ago the shared Global Ministries office of our two denominations designated this Sunday “Immigrant Rights Sunday.” This Sunday was chosen to lift up the realities and rights of immigrants, immigrant workers, and migrant laborers because of its proximity to May 1 which is Labor Day or International Workers’ Day everywhere in the world but the U.S. Such a designation now seems more timely than ever.

Tens of thousands of people – naturally born citizens, legal immigrants, illegal immigrants – Americans all – people – children of God – rallied in cities across our nation yesterday in support of immigrant rights and reform and in opposition to Arizona’s new legislation.

People of faith are strong in numbers among those standing up, speaking out – witnessing to their faith – faith in a “Journeying God, a Migrant Christ, a Border-crossing Spirit.” From the General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, Geoffrey Black, to Desmond Tutu, to the National Coalition of Latino Clergy and Christian Leaders, to Jim Wallis of *Sojourners*, to Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles, to faithful members of congregations all across this land, voices of our Christian faith are rising up to say we are called to and we will “welcome the stranger” as Jesus teaches us to do.

We are primarily a nation of immigrants. Unless we have someone in our midst this morning who is 100% Native American, all of us here today are immigrants. Some of us have lived in this country longer than others and some of our families have been in this country longer than others. But as young as this nation is most of us have some sense of where our ancestry touches another land and we generally need not reach back too many generations to find it. We, or our ancestors, came to this country – immigrated – for a wide variety of reasons: some leave their homeland to avoid starvation or to escape unbearable family situations. Many move to avoid revolution and war. Others are escaping religious or political persecution. Some immigrants were brought to this new land against their will, as slaves. Some immigrate to be reunited with their loved ones. Some move in search of adventure. Throughout history, the number one reason has always been economic opportunity – the search for better land or a better job.

Chances are the majority of the roughly 460,000 illegal immigrants in the state of Arizona and 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States came to this county seeking economic opportunity – just like we, or our ancestors, did.

As is so often the case, when we take the time to consider what we might have in common with those we might call foreign or stranger or other, we find that our essential humanity – our uniqueness and individuality in the eyes of God – is what binds us together as one human family.

Yet it is difficult and challenging to embrace, to truly welcome “an other.” Our scriptures and the scriptures of many faiths are filled with reminders that “God watches over the strangers” (Psalm 146:9) and we are called to, “. . . not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by

doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:2) We need these reminders because it is not easy to embrace, to truly welcome “an other.”

It is far easier to objectify or stereotype those who have certain characteristics that differ from our own identity – whether that difference be race or gender or sexual orientation or ethnicity or sex or physical or mental ability or nationality. Once an “other” is conveniently categorized, set aside, clearly marked “other” then we can consider “them” exotic or novel, peculiar, unlike “us” and capable of, prone to, or defined by behaviors we cannot possibly imagine for ourselves.

Desmond Tutu, in a piece about Arizona’s new legislation on Huffingtonpost.com this past Thursday (April 29, 2010) wrote:

Abominations such as apartheid do not start with an entire population suddenly becoming inhumane. *They start here.* They start with generalizing unwanted characteristics across an entire segment of a population. They start with trying to solve a problem by asserting superior force over a population. They start with stripping people of rights and dignity - such as the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty - that you yourself enjoy. Not because it is right, but because you can. And because somehow, you think this is going to solve a problem.

However, when you strip a man or a woman of their basic human rights, you strip them of their dignity in the eyes of their family and their community, and even in their own eyes. An immigrant who is charged with the crime of trespassing for simply being in a community without his papers on him is being told he is committing a crime by simply *being*. He or she feels degraded and feels they are of less worth than others of a different color skin. These are the seeds of resentment, hostilities and in extreme cases, conflict.

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”  
(Leviticus, Matthew, Mark, Romans, Galatians, James)

It is as simple and as difficult as that.

Jesus’ call to us to “Love your neighbor as yourself” and “welcome the stranger” as though we were welcoming Jesus in our very midst makes it very clear that legislation like Arizona Senate Bill 1070 must be exposed for what it is: “an inhumane, immoral modern-day Jim Crow law essentially guaranteeing racial profiling and criminalizing undocumented people that breaches trust between community members and police and creates panic and fear among vulnerable communities. To remain silent is not an option for us as people of faith and residents of the United States.” Those words are excerpted from a statement issued April 30 (2010) by United Church of Christ General Minister and President the Rev. Geoffrey A. Black and Executive Minister for Justice and Witness Ministries the Rev. Linda M. Jaramillo.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, there are strangers and others and neighbors among us – in our neighborhoods, in our commonwealth, in our grocery stores, in our fast food restaurants, within our borders, at our borders – seeking our welcome.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, *we are also* strangers and others and neighbors seeking welcome from those around *us*.

May we recall that Jesus teaches, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me. . . just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”  
(Matthew 25)

“May God empower us to be witnesses for [Christ],  
acting boldly, in God’s name;  
seeking justice, where there is hurting,  
offering hope where there is pain.”  
(Lord, Prepare Me to Be a Sanctuary, verse 2: words by Scott A. Ressman, Copyright 2009)

May it be so. Amen.

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