

3 Lent – Year C  
Exodus 3:1-15  
1 Corinthians 10:1-13  
Luke 13:1-9

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*

One of the most common metaphors for Lent over the last few decades has been to speak of Lent as a “journey.” The writer or preacher who uses it means to evoke a sense that we turn and leave behind our familiar habits and faults as we move through the weeks we call Lent, and then arrive changed at Easter. However, the description of Lent as a journey tempts us to focus on ourselves, on our own experiences and efforts.

You know, I don't think it was a journey for Jesus. It was a destiny. He pressed fiercely onward toward the redeeming of humans from their addictions to guilt and scapegoating. He sought to save us from the morass of finger-pointing and blame-assigning that condemned all but the sanctimoniously observant to an eternity of self-condemnation. Jesus understood his sacrificial love as a blazing fire that would change the story of the relationship between God and God's creation – including humans!

Our lessons this morning are about journeys and destiny, and perhaps we can learn something about Lent by hearing about some people who really are on a journey.

The United States' Asylum Program resettles thousands of people in this country every year. In 2016, the White House has requested spaces for 85,000 people. If you qualify for resettlement in the US under the asylum laws, you must meet three criteria:

Asylum has three basic requirements. First, an asylum applicant must establish that he or she fears persecution. Second, the applicant must prove that he or she would be persecuted on account of one of five protected grounds: race, religion, nationality, political opinion, and social group. Third, an applicant must establish that the government is either involved in the persecution, or unable to control the conduct of private actors. (Wikipedia; *Asylum in the United States*; accessed 2/20/16.)

People who apply for this program have already suffered terribly and are scared stiff that persecution isn't over. Basically, you have to show that you have no hope of protection from the government or those in positions of responsibility to protect you and your family. Then, you have to meet a series of stringent requirements and fill out endless forms, all of which must be completed and signed off by the proper authorities within an 18-month period. Finally, if you make the cut, and only a very small percentage of applicants do, you face the daunting experience of uprooting your family from the only security you and they have known during the application process, getting on a plane and going to some place in our huge, diverse, unknown country. When you arrive, you'll be called a refugee.

In this region, The Lutheran Children and Family Services help resettle refugee families, by seeking congregations willing to co-host them. In other parts of the country, Episcopal Migration Ministries does this work.

Perhaps you read in our monthly e-newsletter about "Room at the Inn," our own new, St. Paul's effort to become co-hosts and welcome a refugee family. The Vestry approved "Room at the Inn" last Monday. Valerie Kagen and her team hope to be ready by June to provide the living quarters, clothing, translation, transportation, job seeking and living skills that our refugee family will need to become self-sufficient during 2016.

House ad: If you want to learn more about how you can help with one small task or a larger need, be in touch with Valerie and come to the meeting tomorrow evening in Dixon House at 7 pm.

But let's return to Lent and the gospel, and the question of journeys. In our Old Testament lesson today, Moses meets God through a burning bush, and learns how he will take his people out of Egypt to Mount Horeb on a history-making journey. Paul describes the process by which these people were slowly shaped on that journey into those who would enter the promised land. And he reminds the Corinthians:

***God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.***

This is part of what the Refugee Re-settlement process is: a way out of persecution and suffering, into a new land of promise – and also one of deep challenge. The participants must be willing to undertake a frightening, if longed-for journey. Thanks to the US government and religious agencies around the country, thousands of refugees have been resettled over the years. More than 2 million asylum-seekers have been re-settled in the US since 1980, according to Wikipedia. And people like us have been there to help.

Here's another part of this story. It reflects what The Rev. Rob Voyle, an Anglican priest from New Zealand calls “practical compassion.” Without the help of co-costing congregations, our refugee family might arrive at Philadelphia airport with the clothes on their backs and whatever they could fit in a suitcase – but no other resources. Here, with the help of the Lutheran Children's and Family Service case workers, they will be met by representatives from St. Paul's and escorted to their new apartment. It will be furnished with basic furniture, sheets and towels, and kitchen equipment.

Our task will be practical compassion. It will be to provide hospitality and neighboring. As Barbara Brown Taylor says in our Lenten book, *An Altar in the World*, Jesus shows us what radical hospitality looks like, because he himself had no home. What he had was practical compassion. He preached that those who fed the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, clothed

those who needed clothes and tended the sick in his name, would be blessed by him in turn.

Practical compassion underlies Jesus' parable about the little fig tree. It was struggling to become fruitful in the poor soil where someone had planted it. The little fig tree was now threatened with destruction because after three years, it still had borne no fruit. The kind gardener, filled with practical compassion, asked the vineyard owner to let him give the little tree some manure, to richen the soil enough to allow the fig to do what it naturally was meant to do.

So it is with us and so many of our human family members. We too, are not bearing all the fruit we could. Life tests us, and God is with us. Jesus offers us, during Lent and through the Easter promise, opportunities to join with him in practical compassion. "Room at the Inn" is one way we, at St. Paul's Church, will be sharing in this work in the coming months.

Lent. Preparation. Journey. Testing and struggle to reach a promised land. We're in this together, friends. Look around at each other and rejoice, for Easter dawn is coming after the night, and here, there will be Room at the Inn.

*Amen.*