

Reflection

Welcome to refugee Sunday where we celebrate the myriad of people in the world and their unique lives and cultures that make our world a varied and wonderful place! I have never thought of Jesus as a refugee although the story of Jesus going to Egypt to escape the killing of the children born the same year is I'm sure, well known to us all. There is no biblical reference of the happenings to Mary Joseph and Jesus in Egypt. However, we do know much about the lives of refugees around the world in 2021.

It is always difficult for me to understand the language around refugee, immigrant, settlement, permanent resident, citizen, newcomer. What do these words mean and do we have to care which word we use? Yes these words mean very different things. To be an immigrant to Canada from another country I need to apply to the Canadian Government and prove I can sustain myself in this country and that I have a trade or skill that I can use for employment. For myself, my spouse and my 2 children I must bring \$25,000 cash with me and pay for my own travel. (My own ancestors came to Upper and Lower Canada at least 12 generations ago. I know they did not bring a year's income with them. In fact I suspect they may have jumped ship in port). Immigrants must be able to take care of themselves and must have the ability to support themselves in Canada. They are newcomers. They have the choice to settle in communities where there are groups of people from their country of origin and where there may be already established family or are multiple people to help them create community. They prepare to immigrate often for years. Sometimes they have lived and worked in Canada for years before they officially immigrate. They speak fluent English or French. They have set up international bank accounts and transferred money to Canada anticipating their arrival. They make community quickly. They land on their feet. They are employed within weeks. Immigrants establish a new life by their choice.

Refugees apply to the Government of Canada for sanctuary. They come having left their country of origin with whatever possessions they have been able to save from war, from famine, from spending on transportation to a safe place where it is possible to have food clothing and shelter. They often wander from place to place, camp to camp, site to site looking for a place to be. Their search is often impeded by borders, walls, fences, set up to stop their search. 79 million people- more than twice the population of Canada- homeless often living in refugee tent camps outside border crossings with little food, no sanitation and only hope. (I have personally seen the tent refugee camps and the detainees at the border crossing between Nicaragua and Costa Rica). There may be refugee workers helping them through border crossings or assisting them to apply for sanctuary in other countries. Wouldn't you go anywhere safe. Anywhere peaceful. Anywhere you could raise your children to become adults. And when they say to you that you can get on an airplane to Canada in 4 days from now, you pack two bags each (the most weight allowed on the airplane), you kiss the other refugee friends you have made goodbye, and you get on that plane.

And you land in a Canada where you sign papers written in a language you do not read and experience cold that your body has never felt before in your life. And some truly kind people help you but you have to do as they say blindly because you do not really know enough English or French to be able to communicate to ask questions. And hopefully sometimes there is an interpreter there that can help you understand enough to make your own decisions. The calm is unnerving. The quiet at night disturbs your already disturbed sleep. The space around you is intimidating. And google translate is very poor at English to Arabic.

The refugee experience continues on. They haven't prepared to come to Canada. They haven't really even had time to say goodbye. They attend school to learn enough language that they can communicate in simple words. When they open a can or a jar at home they hope the friendly helper who was with them in the grocery store really did understand what product they wanted to buy. (By the way that kind volunteer had no idea what halal is and keeps trying to feed the Muslim children candy with gelatin in it!!). The refugees have no money of their own or perhaps very little that they were able to accumulate in the refugee camp. Because of language or poverty they have to ask someone for everything they need no matter how small. In Swift Current there is no ethnic community to help them. In the middle of the night when their child is ill they must phone the kind faced helper to get out of bed and help them go to the hospital. And the drugs look different and the instructions are all in English and the words "Children's Tylenol" make no sense. The children are sick often because they have no immunity to the illness in Canada. The adults are sick often because their stress is high and their questions are many and their trust is overused and fragile.

In the past refugees often waited weeks for communication with their loved ones from their country of origin. Today cell phones are used almost exclusively in war torn areas and news on international television stations with video filmed on those cell phones is definitely same day sometimes within hours of activities happening. And so the refugee family sees a news broadcast showing the street where their sister and her children live minutes after a bombing. The apartment block where the sisters family lived is in rubble and the sister is not answering her cell phone. The waiting begins and the vigil begins. With each unanswered call the hope grows dimmer. The kind helpers can do nothing but wait with the refugee family consoling, cooking and hoping that news comes soon. This new immediate news world puts a large burden on refugee families thousands of miles away impotent to assist their loved ones in any way.

Often refugee children have not been in school for many years while their family searched for a peaceful home. Their education is often years behind their peers and in a language they are not fluent in. Younger children adapt quickly and learn language easily. Older children accept what education they can get in a hope that they will be able to enter into a post-secondary school that will allow them to acquire enough skills to help to support their family and to start a family of their own. The refugee parents are proud of the accomplishments of their children but of course worry about their children maintaining enough language to speak to their distant relatives in their language of origin and to maintain their familial culture.

The family starts to study for their Canadian citizenship exams 3 years after their arrival in Canada. Until now they have been designated as resettled refugees with permanent residency. Their nationality is still their country of origin although by the fact that they are a refugee they cannot return to that country. They cannot vote in Canada. They cannot obtain a Canadian passport so they cannot travel. They often cannot pass security clearance for jobs or travel because there is no way to obtain any history of criminal activity from their war torn country of origin or their actions in that country have been on the wrong side of the current political fence in their country of origin. They will never be asked to leave Canada but they are not Canadians. In fact they have no choice but to remain in Canada. They remain in limbo with no real legal identity. The Canadian volunteers help the adult refugees to study for the citizenship exams. The refugees and helpers laugh as the Canadians stumble over and try to explain words far past the English Second Language classes and when the Canadian citizens have to google the answers to the questions on the citizenship practise exams.

The life of the refugee is much different than the life of the immigrant. Those of us who help the refugee families to settle here and to become Canadians know that the experience teaches us as much about ourselves as it does about the people we help. The refugee volunteers are often challenged to separate culture and religion, to accept new customs and ideas, to learn new parenting styles, to appreciate so much that we have taken for granted. Always there is the question- Do I have enough love to give? And of course at the base of each of us is the wondering about why we are fortunate enough not to have had to make the difficult decisions refugees have had to make or to face the struggles to find our peace and our community.

And I still wonder what love, what welcome Mary, Josef, and Jesus had in Egypt and who helped the teenage Mary to buy diapers.