

“In a Foreign Land”

Exodus 2:11-25

11th Sunday after Pentecost

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I don't typically begin sermons by referencing the title of the sermon, but this morning, I'd like you to take a glance at the title.

“In a Foreign Land.”

My hope is that when you see the title, you'll think of a time when you have been in a foreign land, or an unfamiliar place. Whether it was spending a semester abroad in college, or maybe some of you know what it's like to work in another country for a significant period of time...or perhaps it just meant moving from one part of this country to another part of this country...what's that experience like?

What is it like to be in a place where the people have different customs and habits and ways of doing the daily tasks of life?

I've told you before that I spent a semester in China when I was in college. This was over 30 years ago now, spring of 1992, but because this was my first venture out of our country, the memories of my time there are still thick.

For example, I loved the food there.

One time, we ate at a restaurant, and we didn't know what they were serving us...it had been pre-ordered by our professor. And I'll never forget finishing the meal, and I asked what one of the dishes was, and our professor told us, “Oh, that was snake!”

I'll never forget that.

I'll never forget washing my clothes in China.

There was no washer or drier in the modest hotel we were living in...no laundry service in that building.

No laundromat nearby that was easy to use or find.
So it was wash your clothes in the bathtub time!

And once I put on my hand-washed clothes, and I headed outside to start each day, I'll never forget—THE BICYCLES. All sorts of people, riding their bikes to work. It seemed like there were always more bikes on the road than cars when I was in China.

But not just bikes. One morning, riding along with the bicycles, I noticed a mule pulling a big cart full of bricks. The guy in the back of the cart was not happy with mule—he didn't think the mule was moving fast enough with those bricks, because every so often the guy threw a brick at the mule to try to get the mule to go faster!

I thought to myself:
Ben, you are not in Minnesota anymore!

Now I would love to return to China someday, because I know from speaking with a couple of you who have been there more recently, I know that things have changed a lot since I was there. What I'm really curious about is whether the people have changed.

I'll never forget how so many strangers in China found out we were visiting from the United States, and they wanted us to feel at home in their country. Went out of their way to welcome us to their country.

And that's the part that made washing clothes in a bathtub perfectly fine for a few months. It was the hospitality of strangers that made all the difference.

Why am I sharing this with you?
Because our text for today is about the early life of Moses.

And it's a text about being a stranger.
 Noticing the stranger.
 Welcoming the stranger.

In chapter two of the book of Exodus, we're told that Moses had to leave his home.

He "saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk."
 He decides to intervene.
 He defended his kinsman.
 He killed the Egyptian.

But that made Moses a wanted man.
 So Moses flees to Midian.

And one day, sitting by a well, he sees a group of shepherds mistreating some young women. Now Moses comes to their defense. Their father happens to be the priest of Midian, and he invites Moses to break bread with him, to stay with him.

In the end, Moses marries one of his daughters.

And when Zipporah gives birth to a baby boy, Moses names him Gershom, which means, in Hebrew, "an alien there"—or as our text puts it, "for I have been an alien residing in a foreign land."

In other words, I have been a stranger.

It seems to me that whoever wrote this story in Exodus long ago wanted us to remember what that's like.

What it's like to be in an unfamiliar place.
 Among unfamiliar people.
 What it's like to be a stranger.

You don't have to travel to another country to know it.
 All you have to do is move to a new city.
 Start fresh at a new school or a new job.
 Or even visit a new church.

How many of you recall your first Sunday visiting Westminster?
 How many of you came back for your second Sunday here because
 everyone IGNORED YOU, turned their back on you, and failed to pay
 any attention to you?

Right.

So let me ask you a question:
What's your theology of the stranger?

**In other words, when it comes to your Christian faith, your life
 of discipleship in Jesus Christ, what role does the stranger play in
 how you follow Jesus?**

In his book, "The Company of Strangers," author Parker Palmer
 begins by telling the story of a ride he took in a taxi in New York City
 years ago.

Palmer asked the driver how he liked his work.

"Well," the driver responded, "you never know who's getting into
 the cab, so it's a little dangerous. But you meet a lot of people. You get
 to know *the public*."

Palmer writes:

*With those two words he turned to look at me, speaking with an
 emphasis which made it clear we were on his favorite subject. The more*

questions I asked, the more often he turned around to underscore his point, and though we were bounding up Broadway at an alarming clip, he was soon spending more time looking back than ahead.

“You get to know the public,” he said, “Which teaches you a lot in life....You exchange ideas and you learn a lot from people....Meeting all these different kinds of people, everything helps, it doesn’t hurt. If you only like one kind of people, it’s no good!....If you’re with the same kind of people all the time...you get sick of it. But the public—that keeps you alive!”

Despite my terror in that careening taxi, writes Palmer, I was deeply moved by the driver’s words...Today, we live in a culture of brokenness and fragmentation...

At bottom, religion, like public life, has to do with unity, with the overcoming of brokenness and fragmentation... The very root of the word religion means to “rebind” or “bind together” ...the church preaches a vision of human unity which means very little if not acted out in the public realm.

Surely that vision applies to more than family and friends.

Surely that vision reaches out to include those who are alien, different, strange. If so, then the church must incarnate its vision in public, for there and only there is the stranger to be found.¹

What’s your theology of the stranger?

Let me throw a few numbers your way.
The first number is 40.

¹ Parker J. Palmer, “The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America’s Public Life,” New York: Crossroad, 1990.

40 is the average number of visitors in this room every Sunday.

Actually, that's not counting Easter. If you include Easter attendance, we average 47 visitors in this room every Sunday. And that makes a difference in EVERYTHING we do.

It makes a difference in how our wonderful Children's Ministry Team—Lauren Slingerland, Caroline Blouin, and Aly Friend provide staffing and oversight and care in our nursery. Anyone want to take a guess as to how many children were in our nursery last Sunday?

It was the 10th Sunday after Pentecost—you know, following Christmas and Easter, the 10th Sunday after Pentecost is the highest holy day of the church calendar...no, it's not, not at all, but our nursery attendance last Sunday may have led someone to think it was Christmas come early.

We had 62 kids in the nursery last Sunday.

And I can't tell you how grateful I am for the kind of attention to hospitality and welcome that Lauren and Caroline and Aly emphasize...because if you're a parent dropping your child off in a church nursery for the first time or the 50th time...do you want your child to be treated like a stranger, or like a member of this church family?

Now, if you look around this room today, you may not see many teenagers here. Why? Because our youth are at Look Up Lodge this weekend, for the annual WPCYG retreat to kick-off the year.

Anyone know how many youth are attending this year?

Nearly 150!

With 23 adult chaperones joining them.

And do you know what our WPCYG leadership, Mary Kathleen Duncan and Anna Hanor, said to those teenagers before the weekend started?

No phones this weekend!

I mean...can I just say, praise Jesus!!??

The point of that is obvious, right?

It's to encourage the youth of this church to look at each other instead of looking at their phone...to get to know one another, maybe even to turn someone who was a stranger...into a friend.

Which, by the way—if our youth can do it, you can do it.

Did you get up this morning, and think to yourself that your MOST IMPORTANT responsibility when you come to church today, is to greet a stranger, get to know a stranger, turn a stranger into a friend?

If not, let me suggest that you is your first and most important job when you enter these doors.

It is, according to scripture, one of the most important parts of our faith.

Hebrews 13.2:

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Deuteronomy 10.19:

“You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

Or how about our first text for today?

Do you remember the difference that strangers made, not just in Moses' life, but also in the life of Jesus?

According to Matthew, when Jesus is just a child, his parents have to flee TO Egypt because Herod wants to kill him. But Joseph and Mary—they didn't know anyone in Egypt. They had no friends or family in Egypt.

Have you ever thought about what it was like for them—when they entered the land of Egypt with a young baby boy, whom someone in authority DESPISED? At that moment, they were refugees. They were migrants. They were fleeing the threat of violence, leaving their homeland, because they needed a safe place to live.

Matthew provides us with no detail, but Joseph and Mary and Jesus would have been dependent on the people of Egypt in order to live. The strangers who saw them, who welcomed them. We don't know who they were, but at that moment, in the life of Jesus, those are the people who made all the difference.

What's your theology of the stranger?

Is it limited to people who set foot in this room?

Does it extend to people outside this room?

How far does it extend outside this room?

One of you asked me last weekend whether I got to do any reading during my sabbatical.

Absolutely.

And one of the books is Allen Levi's novel, "Theo of Golden." It's a book in which an elderly gentleman named Theo sets about turning strangers into friends in the small, fictional town of Golden, Georgia.

One of those strangers turned into a friend is Kendrick Whitaker. Mr. Whitaker is a janitor at the local university.

He is also the father of Lamisha, his 8-year-old daughter who is in the hospital following an accident. Lamisha will never walk without a limp, because a year earlier someone hit the car that her mother was driving.

Her mother was killed.
Lamisha was injured.

So Mr. Whitaker is asked to appear in court, because the man who struck his family is going to trial.

The driver was Mateo Mendez.

Mr. Mendez came to this country from Guatemala without papers and for fourteen years worked as a bricklayer. After fourteen years, he was picked up and deported.

Which meant he left behind his eight-year-old daughter, who was critically ill, and receiving treatment for cancer in this country.

So, at his first opportunity, Mateo returned to the States.

His daughter needed him.

Driving all night to escape detection, he fell asleep at the wheel, which is when the accident happened.

The District Attorney, Derrick Prentiss, asks Kendrick Whitaker to visit him at his office before the sentencing for Mr. Mendez.

“...we’re very interested in what you have to say about the car wreck,” the DA says to Kendrick. “Vehicular homicide is a state offense. It’s a serious charge.”

Kendrick replies:

“Mr. Derrick, I been thinking a lot, a whole lot, about it...At first, I thought I wanted y’all to punish him really hard for what he did. I even felt that way yesterday morning till I finally saw him in court.

“Mr. Derrick, I don’t think that...man meant any harm. It was just a terrible, awful accident, and he’s [been in jail for over a year, hasn’t seen his daughter] he’s already paid a high price, don’t you think?”

“That’s very generous of you, Mr. Whitaker,” the DA replied, “especially after all that the defendant has cost you...”

To which Kendrick says:

“Mr. Derrick. Let me tell you what changed...Up till yesterday, all I had in my head was an idea about him. He was the ‘thing’ that hurt my little girl. And I didn’t mind what y’all did to that ‘thing.’ But what changed me was I looked at his face.

“His eyes had tears in ‘em.

“When I looked at him all I could see is one little man who loves his baby girl looking at another little man who loves his baby girl.”

“And I saw hurt and fear, and it changed me. And when he leaves court tomorrow... Even if y’all put a hard sentence on him...I hope he’ll know somebody looked at him and didn’t see a thing or an idea or a label but a man with a soul.”²

² Allen Levi, “Theo of Golden,” published by Allen Levi, 2023.

Now “Theo of Golden” is a work of fiction.

But what’s not a work of fiction is what our faith says about the stranger.

We don’t get to ignore the stranger.
Or intimidate the stranger.
Or treat the stranger as if they deserve any less dignity than any other child of God in your very own family.

What we’re required to do is welcome the stranger into our lives.
Required...it’s not quite the right word.
I think the better word, the biblical word, is joy.

Welcoming the stranger, turning strangers into friends...

I believe it’s one of the greatest joys of being God’s church.

Can I get an “Amen” to that?

(Amen.)