

A Pilgrimage through Lent: Walking with Refugees on the Journey

Pilgrimage: A journey undertaken with the purpose of honoring God

During their 6-week Lenten sermon series, Pastors Tom and Samantha Widlund will be guiding us on a journey to Jerusalem with Jesus, reacquainting us with eyewitnesses who were on the receiving end of his love and compassion. Before it is over, we will imagine ourselves among them, contemplating whether we are willing to follow Jesus all the way to the cross and resurrection—or if we will turn away.

Refugees from some of the most humanly challenging places on the planet will accompany us on the journey. Each Sunday we will spend a few minutes sharing information about a current refugee or migrant group and then invite prayerful consideration of their humanity and suffering, asking God to open our hearts to them with Christ-like love and compassion.

We live in extraordinarily difficult times. Conflict, persecution, and poverty around the world have resulted in the highest levels of human displacement on record, exceeding WWII levels. According to the most recent report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, by the end of 2015 the total number of displaced persons had reached 65.3 million, one out of every 113 people on Earth.

In the face of this global crisis, many of our nation's political leaders are calling for us to bar the gates—that *not* to do so puts our lives at risk—while many of our nation's spiritual leaders say that not welcoming the stranger puts our very souls at risk.

Concern for the plight of migrants and refugees has a strong foundation in Scripture: both the Old and New Testaments include stories of people who had to leave their homelands and flee from their enemies. The biblical message to those who would receive or deny them is clear and unambiguous, said Bishop Bruce Ough, president of the United Methodist Church Council of Bishops, in a statement he issued last month. "We are to welcome the sojourner, love our neighbor and stand with the most vulnerable among us.

"When we abandon strangers who are at risk of bigotry, xenophobia and violence we not only destroy their hope, we destroy our own souls," the bishop said in his statement. "When we fail to assist the refugees fleeing danger, we not only place them in harm's way, we do harm to our own souls."

In this season of Lent, when we are invited to engage in spiritual stocktaking and realignment, let us pray that God will open our minds and hearts to the challenge and invitation to model Jesus' example of love for the most vulnerable among us. On this spiritual pilgrimage, let us pray to see migrants and refugees with what Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz describes as the "mysticism of open eyes": an increased readiness to see and name suffering, to trust the truth of the victims, to

be moved to compassion and empathy, and to respond, and in so doing, to experience God's presence in suffering and hope.

"One of the principal truths of Christianity, a truth that goes almost unrecognized today, is that looking is what saves us."

—*Simone Weil, Waiting for God*

Biblical references to refugees and immigrants (abbreviated list),
NRSV translation

Exodus 22:21 "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien; for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."

Deuteronomy 10:19 "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Isaiah 16:4 "Let the outcasts of Moab settle among you; be a refuge to them from the destroyer."

Zechariah 7:10 "Do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor."

Matthew 25:35-36, 40 "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me ... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Luke 10:25-37 The parable of the Good Samaritan

Romans 12:13 Regarding marks of the true Christian: "... extend hospitality to strangers."

Hebrews 13:1-2 "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."