

**“Aliens in ‘Our’ Land”**

**Exodus 23.6–9**

**Jeremiah 7.1–7**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, July 17, 2005**

Just to clarify: when we talk about aliens, we're not talking about the green variety that land in Roswell, New Mexico. We're talking about people – people who are not in their own land, who are foreigners, and people who often are of lesser social status.

The land was promised to the people of Israel after they fled slavery in Egypt, and the writer of Exodus reminds the Hebrew people that they were aliens there. The idea is that if we can identify with the people who are at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, we'll be more likely to treat them justly.

Again, the people of Israel would become aliens during their exile in Babylon. And by Jesus' time in the first century, most of the Jewish people were again aliens, living in the diaspora. All of this experience underscores the constant refrain in the Hebrew Bible not to oppress the resident alien.

Have you ever felt like an alien? When traveling, even to another part of the United States, have you ever felt that you stuck out like a sore thumb because of your accent or your lack of understanding of local customs? During a trip to Africa, I was the only white guy among 30 or so travelers, and it was a good experience for me – who is almost always in the majority – to sense even briefly what it feels like to be in the minority. I've had other experiences feeling like an outsider, as well.

I spent my junior year in college at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. I lived in an all-male residence hall that was previously a hotel built in the 18th century, which means it didn't have central heat. We all ate meals together, and as we were waiting for the staff to unlock the dining room, about 30 of us were milling around talking. And behind me I heard one of my fellow residents talking about how awful the American students were because they were dominating the intramural basketball league, and his commentary concluded with a very visceral, “Bloody yanks.” And then he saw me and was overcome with embarrassment, and he fell over himself apologizing. I knew that he wasn't talking about me, but all of a sudden I felt incredibly different and “other.” I was the alien.

Have you ever had moments when you've experienced alienation within your community or your family? Have you ever been kicked out of your family? That is one of the deepest hurts of all. It's *intentional* alienation, and it's a sin. Sin is something that causes us to alienate ourselves from God. I feel safe in saying that the intention of God is that we would draw the circle wide to include anyone who wants to be in our midst, rather than alienating someone. *We must honor the other*, because we have been there, and we know the pain of being alienated.

Have you ever felt alienated from yourself – felt uncomfortable in your own skin? When we are inauthentic with ourselves or when we deny something about our personhood for whatever reason, our identity and self-perception can become fragmented. Sometimes we lose track of who we are, and it can take something dramatic to realign us. Alienation from ourselves is particularly insidious because it prevents us from being whole, from being the persons God intends us to become. *We must honor ourselves*, because we are God's beloved.

So, we can look at alienation scripturally, historically, sociologically, spiritually, or psychologically. And each is an important lens through which we observe what it means to be an alien. But there are other lenses, too.

*B' B' B'*

When I read these words from Exodus and Jeremiah I think of our own context, here and now. Do we in the United States observe the injunction not to “oppress the alien?”

I’m thinking primarily of undocumented immigrants from the south. Currently, there are an estimated 10.3 million undocumented aliens living in the United States, 8.4 million of whom came from Mexico or other Latin American countries. Each year 485,000<sup>1</sup> undocumented immigrants enter the United States, and 1.1 million are caught by the Border Patrol.<sup>2</sup> No matter where you stand on immigration issues, I’m fairly certain you’ll agree that there is a problem.

When half of Mexico’s 100 million people live in poverty, earning less than \$2 a day, how can anyone blame them for wanting to escape poverty, work abroad, and send money home?

And that begs the question: **Whose land is it anyway?** Do we take the psalmist seriously when he writes, “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it?” Those of us who have inherited English legal tradition have well-developed property statutes that delineate international borders, but our common law traditions are not divinely given, unlike the repeated command not to oppress the alien. Is the land ours because we have surveyed it, claimed it, fought for it, and got there first? (Well, first unless you count the indigenous peoples who lived here for millennia before Europeans became the first illegal aliens in America.)

For the sake of argument, let’s say that we have a legal right to have fixed borders and to set immigration policy. How do we do that and not oppress the aliens in our midst? Well, one way is certainly not to encourage vigilante groups like the well-armed, so-called Minutemen who recently patrolled the Arizona border. On their website, their head honcho, Chris Simcox writes, “You are considering joining the Minutemen not because of bias towards people from another country, but rather because you feel your government owes the citizens of the United States protection from people who wish to take advantage of a free society.”<sup>3</sup> (Funny, I thought creating a free society was the stated objective of our war in Iraq.)

Tom Tancredo, a member of Colorado’s Congressional delegation has encouraged the Minutemen, saying “You are real heroes – each of you represents literally millions of Americans.”<sup>4</sup> And Arnold Schwarzenegger said that the Minutemen have “done a terrific job. And they have cut down the crossing of illegal immigrants by a huge percentage. ... It’s a shame that the private citizen has to go in there and start patrolling our borders.”<sup>5</sup> In response, I’d like to remind us that we are not to oppress the alien. Much to his credit, President Bush came out and called the Minutemen what they are: *armed vigilantes*. And he’s taken some heat from the far right for it.

The reality is more than 2,000 people have died trying to cross our border with Mexico since 1998, most of them as a result of stifling desert heat.<sup>6</sup> And already this year, 151 people have died.

I certainly don’t have an answer for the huge problem of unchecked immigration, but I have to wonder why we don’t try to help Mexico solve its economic situation through sustainable economic development, rather than trying to stem the flow of human tragedy with more secure fences (and indirectly with vigilantes). NAFTA clearly isn’t working in this

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<sup>1</sup> above data come from the Pew Hispanic Research Center

<sup>2</sup> Associated Press wire story

<sup>3</sup> www.minutemenhq.com

<sup>4</sup> ibid.

<sup>5</sup> www.parapundit.com

<sup>6</sup> www.rtfcam.org

dimension. Our current immigration policy essentially ignores the economic realities on either side of the border. *What do you think it means not to oppress the alien?*

The Presbyterian Church (USA), the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the UCC are funding a nonprofit in Arizona called Humane Borders,<sup>7</sup> which provides more than 50 water stations along Arizona's border with Mexico with more than 3,000 volunteers. They work with the INS, the Mexican Consulate, and local news media to chart where deaths have taken place and that's where they locate the water stations.

We need to take scripture seriously. We need to listen to the voices of the prophets. We need to allow ourselves to be swayed by the still-speaking voice of God today.

I'm not going to tell you what you should think or what you should do, but I will ask you to consider your faith and what it has to say about how we treat one another. We need to heed the echoes of God's voice that we hear in Exodus and Deuteronomy, of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah, all of whom repeat the refrain: "Do not oppress the alien."<sup>8</sup> This isn't a one-off proof text, it is a leitmotif that recurs again and again and again.

In our society, in our own lives, we *still* ask the question: "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty **or a stranger** ... and did not take care of you?" And if you listen carefully perhaps you will hear the voice of Jesus when he says, "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."<sup>9</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> [www.humaneborders.org](http://www.humaneborders.org)

<sup>8</sup> Deut. 24.21, Jer. 22.3, Ez. 22.29, Zech. 7.10

<sup>9</sup> Mt 25.44 & 40