

Warp & Weft: God's Vision of a Woven-Together World
Jeremiah 7:3-7

All this season we've been talking about integrity, wholeness, weaving together our deepest values and our actions. This sermon was going to be about a faithful response to immigration, how followers of Jesus respond when others come seeking refuge across national borders. I was going to remind you that over and over again, from the beginning of the story about God and God's people, as that story is contained in the Bible, God has said, "You shall welcome the alien, the foreigner, the stranger. Remember that you too were once an alien people. Remember that you too are here because someone welcomed you."

And then, on Friday night, people who had turned themselves into bombs exploded in Paris. Terrorists who looked like strangers stood in public places—restaurants, concert halls, a soccer stadium—and shot people randomly, hatefully, shockingly. We were suddenly reminded—again—that in this world there is no place that is entirely safe from people who want to do harm. There is one more piece of evidence that not everyone comes with the same good heart and good will. There is now even more reason to fear that immigrants who come across our national borders may be coming to hurt us rather than to become one of us. What happened in Paris this weekend was horrifying. *Of course* we are afraid.

Most of the governments of the western world will do things in the coming weeks and months that will make us feel a little more secure: close our borders more tightly, look with mistrust on anyone traveling from Syria or the Middle East, raise our suspicions about people who might have anything in common with those terrorists. We will be inclined to fear more anyone who does not look *like us*.

I wondered if I should put this sermon away for a while. I wondered if it would seem odd to you, a little forced, to sing *Draw the Circle Wide* at the opening of worship this morning. But no. No terrorist act, no act of human violence, no *fear*, should be able to shake us from our convictions as people of faith. This sermon is still going to be about God's unshakable insistence that in God's world, there are no strangers; there is no one who is too foreign to be welcomed among us.

The truth is that the world is not much different than it was a week ago, or before September 11, 2001. God's hope for humanity and commandments about how to live are not based on some naive optimism that made more sense when the world was less complicated. The world has always been a scary place. We—humans—have always held the power to hurt one another. It has always been frightening to encounter someone who is different from you; to hold your hands out to someone you don't know, whose language you do not understand, whose story you cannot identify with. The stranger has always seemed dangerous. People who have lived for a long time in a particular place have always resisted newcomers.

But since the beginning of our story, God has reminded his people: you too were once a newcomer, a foreigner, an alien. You who tell the story of Abraham, of God saying, "Go from

your home to a new land that I will show you;” you who count as your ancestors slaves who escaped from Egypt through the Red Sea; you of all people know what it is like to hear a voice say, “Go.” When those spiritual ancestors of ours arrived in their new home, God said to them: Now you are here in your own homeland. I brought you here. And I am saying to you: Never oppress or create hardship for the alien who comes among you. *Those who come to you needing something are to be treated with love and generosity.* And I will be right here with you, making sure there is enough to go around.

Everyone—*everyone*—loves their own homeland best. But all through history, when life has become intolerable, when they felt they had no other choice, people have picked up their family and their belongings and moved somewhere else. Now, we are in the middle of one of the greatest migrations of humanity that the world has ever seen. In Europe, millions of people are standing at borders, asking to be admitted to a country where they will be safe from the danger that forced them out of their homes. Children from Central America risk spending years in an American detention center because they are afraid they would die if they stayed in the place they loved, the place that was home to them. What all these refugees fear is the same kind of terror we all fear. What they seek is the same kind of home we want for ourselves.

Last week *The New York Times* released a short film about three children whose families are part of this great migration. I want you to see it:

http://www.nytimes.com/newsgraphics/2015/nytvr#the_displaced

Those children are not terrorists.

We could talk for a long time about how governments should deal with the families of children like Oleg and Chuol and Hana. There are many things to say about what will happen to the economy and jobs and housing and health care and education if everyone who wants to move to a new country is allowed to enter. Our discussion would be full of practical and economic arguments. Those are the arguments we hear in politics. They are what candidates talk about. And they’re important.

People who call themselves Christian have different opinions. We too engage in those political debates. We cannot ignore the reality of a dangerous world. But we are people of faith. What shapes our minds and our hearts is not just politics or economics, or even common sense. It’s God’s voice. Sometimes it’s hard to know what God would say about contemporary issues. But this time, about immigration, it is not. God has been clear about this from the very beginning. “The alien who resides among you shall be to you as a citizen; you shall love the foreigner as yourself,” God said to the people of the Old Testament. (Leviticus 19:34) “I was a stranger and you welcomed me,” Jesus said. (Matthew 25:35) “When were you a stranger?” they asked him. “Every time you welcomed someone poor and desperate and a long way from home,” he said, “you welcomed me.”

God is so certain about this that he *became* the stranger, so that we might understand. Let us not be so afraid that we forget who we are, *whose* we are.