

### John 3:14-21 The Message (MSG)

13-15 “No one has ever gone up into the presence of God except the One who came down from that Presence, the Son of Man. In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life.

16-18 “This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn’t go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person’s failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him.

19-21 “This is the crisis we’re in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won’t come near it, fearing a painful exposure. But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is.”

*Grace. The grace of God is an essential part of God’s character. Grace is closely related to God’s benevolence, love, and mercy. Grace can be variously defined as “God’s favor toward the unworthy” or “God’s benevolence on the undeserving.” In His grace, God is willing to forgive us and bless us abundantly, in spite of the fact that we don’t deserve to be treated so well or dealt with so generously. God’s undeserved love.*

God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son... God loves the world so much that he gave the best he had, all that he had.

We have all received his generous compassion and *when we realize that*, we are moved to be compassionate as he was, to share the compassionate love of Jesus with our world. We live in God’s grace.

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells the world that wherever one of the little ones is rejected – whether the hungry person is left unfed or the prisoner remains unvisited or the stranger stands in the narthex unwelcomed, he takes it personally. Whenever we ignore or turn away those in need, we hurt Jesus – and in the end, that hurts us all. We often pass by the hungry, forget the prisoner and reject the stranger, hurting ourselves and others in the process.



Today is Refugee and Migrant Sunday, a time set aside to remember and respond to the strangers in our midst.

What is a Refugee? Our government defines refugees as people outside of their country who are unable or unwilling to return home because they fear serious harm.

*To be granted asylum, a person has to demonstrate a “well-founded fear of persecution” in your home country. There are roughly 50 million refugees in the world. The largest single source of refugees at this moment is Syria with 4 million of its residents desperately seeking a safe place to stay. Over 220,000 Syrians have been killed, including 110,000 civilians.*

The next most dangerous area in the world is the Northern Triangle of Central America (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador) where there is a murder an hour as a result of increasingly powerful international mafia who are controlling large territories. These criminal organizations make their money from the extortion of small businesses (over \$650 million dollars a year), drug trafficking, guns trafficking and human trafficking. They forcibly conscript teenage boys and they force girls to become sex slaves on the threat of murdering family members. Approximately 80,000 children, youth and their mothers arrived in the United States over the past two years seeking asylum.

It can be overwhelming to even think about all these suffering people; after all, we have enough suffering in our country alone, right?

There is no doubt that we find Jesus in the refugee who is often hungry, thirsty, sick, and even imprisoned. So much political rhetoric swirls around us these days about “America” that we forget we live in a global community and that very few places have the privileges and resources that this country affords us. As we watch on television the plight of those in Syria, Central and South America, Africa, and other places who are displaced from their homes by war, persecution, and natural disaster, how easy it is for us to discern that this is not our problem except to make sure that they don’t become a burden on Europe’s or our social, economic, and health care systems. How do you think Jesus would assess that approach to today’s refugee crises? Who are the sheep? Who are the goats? Who are the least of these?

After World War II, in the midst of the worldwide horror caused by the Holocaust and a truly enormous number of refugees, almost all of the countries in the world signed the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations which included the “right to seek asylum from persecution”. This impulse to provide hospitality, is supported by over 92 passages in the Old and New Testament. The great Christian author Henri Nouen spoke of the Christian life as a journey from hostility to hospitality. The scriptures which call us to hospitality often remind us that it is also in our benefit to do so; Hebrews 13:2 reminds us that when we welcome strangers that we may be welcoming angels in disguise. The word for angel in Koine Greek refers to more than just celestial beings. Angels are any messenger of God sent to bring a blessing. Any stranger could be an angel. Our impulse is to see the other as a threat – and that can always be true! -- but there are also intimate enemies – and the other can be an angel, bringing a blessing.

The Lutheran church has a long proud history of welcoming migrants and refugees. Our theology of grace calls us to share the grace that we have received from God with others in need of mercy and rescue. We have many opportunities through our national organization Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service to help – from donations to advocacy.



*The Wilbur Wilburforce Antitrafficking legislation of 2008 mandates that unaccompanied migrant children and youth from these countries receive a full asylum assessment. However, this requires legal assistance. When these children and youth are able to obtain lawyers, over 77% are granted refugee status. However, our government does not automatically grant lawyers to asylum seekers. When they don't have access to a lawyer, only 7% of them are recognized as refugees. Under the current federal administration, our government is actively prioritizing the detention and deportation of these children and youth, and their mothers.*

We also have local opportunities in our Synod. The Guardian Angels is a project of the Synod Justice and Global Missions teams.

The Angels accompany children and youth from Central America in court, observing the process to ensure that their rights are respected, referring them to services and caring for them. Here is a local story.

Sandra came to the United States from a very poor area in El Salvador to work and send the money home to her sister to care for her son Christian so that he could go to school. When Christian was 12 years old, the neighborhood where his school is located was taken over by the Marasalvatrucha. When his aunt tried to take him to school, she was told that he couldn't enter that area because he lived outside the territory. When she defied the order, she was stabbed in front of Christian. Traumatized, Christian fled to the United States to run to his mother and was picked up at the border by the Border Patrol; he was released into the custody of this mother while his immigration case was in process. However, he did not have a lawyer. The judge ordered his mother to find him a lawyer, but as a fast food worker she did not have the capacity to pay for a lawyer. At the next court date, the judge said that Christian would be deported if she did not find a lawyer for him. When Sandra and Christian were crying in the corridor outside the courtroom, a Guardian Angel volunteer tapped her on the shoulder and helped them to find a lawyer. Christian now has been granted political asylum and can stay in this country legally. He is studying hard in school so that he too can be a lawyer when he grows up, and his faith is strong. Sandra says that they now believe in Guardian Angels.

If you would like to be trained to volunteer as a Guardian Angel, please contact Pastor Alexia Salvatierra at [alexia@alexiasalvatierra.com](mailto:alexia@alexiasalvatierra.com). Of course, the Guardian Angels also always need donations! You can donate through our Synod. If you want to see for yourself, the Global Partners Team sponsors an annual trip to our companion Synod, the Lutheran Church of El Salvador, from July 31-August 7th. The information about costs and how to sign up is on the synod website.

Practice God's grace, the same way you have received it. Keep refugees and migrants in your prayers. This is a dark moment around the world for those feeling violence; the love of Christ coming through you can make all the difference for someone else.

We are Hill Avenue Grace: See the banner? It is printed on the bulletin. Notice the presence of Mary and Jesus.

Do we want the banner to be an invitation? Where do we place the banner? Do we mean it? What do we do when we welcome the immigrant or refugee? Do we need training? Who will step up and do what we want to do?

