

Ruth, Hagar, Joseph, Mary, Jesus... **Sermon on Refugees**

To start my sermon today –
let me ask you a couple of questions...
questions that have as many answers as we are individuals in this church, but
questions that are expressing common ground in the life stories of all the people
in this international congregation.
Many of us come from foreign, far-away countries. And many of us have
experienced being abroad and living in a place other than home.

What experiences of warm welcome & hospitality have you had on your life
journey?

Who supported you? ...and encouraged you?

Who took you in and let you stay?

Who gave you a meal, who cared & became your “new family”?

And what did you learn from your experiences of hospitality?

Did they teach you to offer your home to others?

Throughout the history of humankind, throughout the stories of the Bible – both
Old and New Testament – being separated from home has always been an issue
to many people.

Being separated from home was and is as much an issue as coping with the
separation & making a new home in the strange place.

In recent years the numbers of people being uprooted are constantly increasing.
Situations are changing so rapidly, and new groups of people & individuals are
constantly leaving or fleeing from their homes.

And we have of course immediate insight into all that through the mass media.
As a matter of fact: migration of peoples and individuals has always been a
reality of history, just as it is today.

There have always been Ruths and Noomis, Hagers, Josephs, Marys, parents
with young kids journeying for the one or the other reason. There have always
been Jesus figures who are meeting us in the hungry & the thirsty, in the
stranger & the naked, in the sick & in the captives – those least important, the
poorest of the poor who need others doing something for them.

And of course we can add to this list all those who are worn out, sad, depressed &
powerless; all those who feel – for whatever reason – alienated, overwhelmed,
not-belonging...

Homelessness – in terms of not-belonging – is a central human problem. And
home-making in the form of building a house, establishing a community, offering
friendship & making friends is a central human challenge.

And many Christians over the centuries have responded to the challenge by
looking out for each other, finding each other, meeting up with each other, and
worshipping together.

Among all the Biblical stories I could have chosen for today there are many more stories telling us of people who are separated from home, uprooted, on the journey, seeking new land, than there are stories of people who stay home and find life nice and easy.

10 years ago I read a book by a woman who was a displaced person for almost 5 years after world war II.

Barbara Ohler Weber, author of the book, was the mother of my friend Chirs from Colorado.

The book by Chris' mother is the true story of a 1950ies immigrant family. Near the end of World War II they were living in a rural village in Romania. Since they had no access to newspaper or radio, they had no information whatsoever about what was going on in the rest of Europe. They had no insight into politics and the proceeding of the war. There were rumours now and again – but that was it. Barbara Ohler Weber was 20 years old, when all of a sudden her life changed for ever. She had to flee from her home as the Russian army was moving the war in the direction of her village.

Barbara fled alone with her six month old daughter. She lost her family, and she hadn't heard from her husband, who'd been forced to become a German soldier. Wherever Barbara turned, she continually tried to keep ahead of the advancing Russian army. This was the beginning of a frightening & exhausting odyssey that took them through the end of the war and into the turmoil & the horror of post war refugee life. This was the end of a life and a home in Tschippendorf in Romania.

Nothing would ever be the same again.

Barbara had been born into an 800 year old tradition of so-called German-Saxons that had been invited by a 12th century king. They'd been promised free land and citizenship. They cultivated the land, but they were never accepted by the local Romanians. They kept to their own people, spoke their own language, and had schools and churches of their own.

Since they were still regarded Germans, at the end of World War II they were supposed to flee from their country.

Barbara with her tiny daughter were in the first group to leave, Barbara's sister Katarina had to flee with 5 children – including an eleven day old baby...

These were the orders.

They didn't have suitcases, bags or boxes. What they took along, they put in a small sheet and tied the four corners together.

In her last night at home the only thought Barbara could think, was her husband Mike & how much she missed him, & how much she loved him. She had no clue, where he was, - or whether he was still alive.

They travelled endless journeys on overcrowded trains that only existed of freight wagons. They had no water to drink, no food to eat, no toilet facilities. Sometimes passing by soldiers would share their food rations with them...

After fearful weeks on the train, Barbara's little Maria became seriously ill.

Maria's condition would remain a deep concern to Barbara for many months.

Often they would not even have a roof over their heads for the night. And finally they reached a sort-of safe place in Austria: a refugee camp near a train station. After weeks in dirt and damp Barbara was given a clean white sheet. And when she finally went to bed, she had lost everything that once was home, but she knelt by the bed and thanked God from the bottom of her heart. Later there followed housing in large rooms, straw mats & sleeping on the floor... dirt, despair and depression...

And then Barbara writes:

“One day as I walked around the streets, somebody came and talked to me. It was an older lady. She invited me to her home. She seemed so nice that I gladly went with her. She introduced me to her husband and asked many questions. They wanted to know where we came from and how we travelled. I told them everything that had happened from the time we had left our village. We talked a long time, and then she served us a good homemade meal. Even though they had only what they got with the ration cards, they shared it with us. Then she went to the bedroom and brought back two dresses and two little nightgowns for Maria. She said that they had been clothes that her nieces had outgrown. She had a nightgown and a sweater for me as well. Here again was proof that God had really heard my prayers and had taken care of us. From then on I went to their home quite often. They were so kind. She even held Maria as I often felt sick to my stomach. Later we found out that the camp had served us soup with frozen potatoes which can be toxic. The little bit of food these kind people gave me made me feel so much better.”

Of course the journey continued. They arrived in a town in central Austria. And after 3 months Barbara met her mother again. They prayed and thanked God and for the first time in those months Barbara cried and cried. Still little Maria was very sick, but the refugees received much help by the local families.

At Christmas, Barbara writes, “our people were invited to the school for a Christmas party. The local children sang and recited poems. It was not like Christmas at home where we held to our traditions, but it felt good to be together and to have people around us who cared. We felt honoured to be invited to celebrate with the local community of the area. (...) We were surprised when we were given gifts. Every family according to size, received Christmas cookies, some apples, flour, jam, eggs and lard. This meant we could use our ration cards for other food. We were all grateful because now we would be able to eat better for several weeks. Not all the people of the area were as kind as these people were. Some people resented the refugees and weren't happy that we had been sent to their community.”

Some time, in all those months Barbara's husband Mike was able to come and see them. And that was the last time that Barbara saw Mike for four endless years. Only in 1948 would he come home from the Russian prison camp – marked for life.

Again, just before they have to leave once more, Barbara writes about these people in the Austrian town:

“The people from this town had been very good to us. Even though they were all Roman Catholic, and we were Lutheran. They had provided for us to have our own services in another town every second Sunday. They even gave us transportation. The good people also gave us some clothes and other things. They all had tried to make things good for us. If only we could have stayed with them.”

They couldn't.

What stroke me many times reading the book was that wherever they came to, whoever they were with, Barbara's people always tried to get together and worship!

Homeless for years these amazing people created a home within their hearts. They did not give up praying and hoping – and wherever possible they did this together in community.

I cannot present to you Barbara's whole story. And I have not shared with you the saddest parts...

It is in May 1952 that Barbara and Mike and their – by then - three children managed to immigrate to the US as so-called displaced persons, - people without a home.

After weeks in refugee camps, on trains, on the ship, the “displaced” family arrived in America.

Exhausted from the journey, tired and hungry, not speaking a word of English, they were given train tickets to the west.

“Our name was called. Mike went to see what was going on. He came back shortly with good news. We were given tickets for the train from New York to Wenatchee, Washington. The church that was sponsoring us had sent money for the train and some spending money for us to use on the journey. We had 64 Dollars to use for food.

We were so thankful. Later when we paid that money and the train fare back to the church, we could not tell them how much it meant to us. It was not just the money, it was the reassurance that someone did care for us, and we were not forgotten.”

After a two days train journey Barbara writes:

“Very early in the morning on 13th June 1952, we finally arrived in Wenatchee. As we looked out the window, there were a lot of people on the platform. It seemed strange for that many people to be at this small station so early in the morning. When we stepped off the train, we realized that all the people were waiting for us. There were about 30 people from the church and our sponsors the Stutzmans. Most important thing to us at that moment was the sight of my sister and her family, and the other family that had travelled with them from Austria. We were exhausted, dirty and also very hungry. Immediately all those people stepped forward, hugged us and said things we didn't understand but they all smiled. This was something we weren't used to. They were welcoming us with

just those smiles. We realized that as refugees, we hadn't been smiling much. This friendship from strangers and being with friends and relatives again was wonderful. As we say today, it really "made our day". It was one of the happiest days of our lives."

It was and it stayed the church community that helped Barbara and Mike and the growing family to manage making a new home in the country.

Wherever Barbara and Mike lived, they were faithful churchgoers and members of God's huge family that doesn't know division because of language, colour or class.

The longer they lived in the new country, the more they became supportive to others, learned the language, and contributed to the life of the church with their time and their talents.

Barbara writes:

"My nephew George who spoke some English, told us that we were supposed to go back to church in the evening. We didn't understand why, but we went anyway. We were told to go down into the large room. The table was full of packages. Next to the table were two chairs, one for Mike and one for me.

We were told to open the packages. Even this was a new experience for us. We were not used to getting presents, and packages were never wrapped with colourful paper.

Inside the packages were household things, clothes for us and the girls, some food, fruits and vegetables from the gardens, and a radio! (...)

After opening and admiring all the gifts again and again, we thought that the least we could do was to thank everyone. Mike thought a little, then pushed the chair back and stood up. He said "Much, much thank you." That was what we had learned in those few days. Everybody seemed to be happy with Mike's reply and were smiling. Some even had tears in their eyes."

I don't think that now there is more to say than what Jesus said:

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...

These verses remain a central human challenge.

Let us respond to it by being the church God wants us to be and offering a home to all who come. Amen.

Prayer

Loving God,

help us to say "yes" to this central human challenge.

Help us to offer a home to all who come.

Confirm us that we are not alone.

Make us the people who heal each other, who grow strong together,

who know what it means to live in community, moving towards a common dream for a new heaven and a new earth in the power of your love, the company of Jesus Christ and the leading of the Holy Spirit. Amen.