

LAND OF MY SOJOURN

Psalm 39:12: Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear unto my cry; hold not thy peace at my tears: for I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were.

A few years ago we had in our church a fine young man. He loved coming to church and worshiping God. He loved listening to the singing. He loved reading the Word. He loved all of you.

One day he was driving to work and got pulled over for having a taillight burned out on his car. He went to the traffic court and was assessed a fine. When he came out of the courthouse the officer met him again. This time the officer told him that he had checked with the US Department of Homeland Security. You see, this young man was in the country illegally.

You see twenty years before he lived in severe poverty in his home of Guatemala. He crossed the border from Guatemala into Mexico illegally. There he walked the 1,100 miles from the border of Mexico to the border of the United States. Once there he walked another 1,942 miles to New Jersey. There he lived for the next 20 years as an alien inside the United States. He held whatever jobs he could find. He paid his taxes.

He even found love. After many years he married a young woman in the US. She was a citizen. The two of them got married and had two children who were also US citizens. Everything about the family seemed as normal as could be. They owned a car, rented a house, and the four of them seemed as normal as any family in this church.

But the problem was that in the eyes of the law, he was still an illegal alien. As an illegal alien, the normal rules and rights did not apply. So when he was arrested he was taken to a local jail to be held until he could be transferred to the Federal authorities in Cleveland. I experienced this first hand as I tried to find him. I called every jail in the area asking if they had a prisoner by his name. None of the jails had a record of him. I came to find out that because he was not a citizen, the jails never bothered to even book him into custody. He was left in a holding area where people are normally held for a few minutes while the arresting officer fills out paperwork. In his case, he sat there for a full day. Every 24 hours he was

transferred to a different local jail where the process was repeated. Every time I called, I was told that there was no one in custody by that name. I eventually learned to ask if there were any unregistered prisoners being held.

All this time his wife was an emotional wreck. Because he was not allowed to call and the police had no obligation to inform her about what they were doing, her husband simply disappeared. My wife and I went over to her house and found her sitting in the front seat of her car, sobbing uncontrollably. She wanted to go somewhere and do something, but she didn't know where to go or what to do.

Eventually I found him when he was transferred to DHS agents and formally booked into a jail cell. I drove to the jail and asked to speak to him. At first I was told that I would have to come back during regular visiting hours. I pulled out my minister's license and was given the book to sing in. This is the one and only time that I have gotten something tangible out of it.

I spoke to him for a short time through the glass of the jail. Ever the eternal optimist, he told me that he was doing well and was even witnessing to the other people in the jail. He asked if I could bring him some clean underwear. I prayed with him and left the jail. I immediately called my wife, who called his wife to tell her that I had seen him with my own eyes and he was fine. She was so relieved and thanked us over and over.

Some of you might feel that he got what he deserved. You might say that he was in the country illegally, after all, and was therefore a criminal. I would like to remind you of something by way of a quote from Paul:

1 Corinthians 6:11: And such were some of you...

How, you ask, are you an illegal alien? "I was born into this country."

If you are a citizen of God's kingdom, then you are a resident alien of this world. There is nothing more important to understanding the Bible than to understand that nearly everyone in it is a stranger living only temporarily

Abraham

Abraham started out in the city of Ur of the Chaldeans. According to what we know he was a full-fledged member of that society. When he felt the call to look for God, he left that society and headed out as a stranger. Abraham never again

was a member of any country in which he lived. He lived there, but he was not part of that society. He travelled to the area we now know as Israel, to a place between Bethel and Ai. God told him to look all around and know that God would give his descendants everything that Abraham could see. But Abraham did not possess the land himself.

After spending some time in the land that God had promised, Abraham travelled to Egypt.

Genesis 12:10: And there was a famine in the land: and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there; for the famine was grievous in the land.

Abraham sojourned in Egypt. He was not an Egyptian citizen, but he simply lived there as a resident alien. In Egypt he told them that his wife was his sister because he was afraid that they would kill him and steal her. When Pharaoh found out what he had done, he deported Abraham.

Genesis 12:20: And Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him: and they sent him away, and his wife, and all that he had.

So Abraham travelled back to the place that God took him before: to the place between Bethel and Ai. Yet even then Abraham sojourned in the land but he was never part of the society. We see this called out when Sarah died.

Genesis 23:3: And Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spake unto the sons of Heth, saying

Genesis 23:4: I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a burying place with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.

So even though Abraham had lived among the people of Heth for years, he was still not considered part of their group. They thought well of him, but he was not one of them.

Lot

Lot, Abraham's nephew, also had to deal with the prejudice of living as a stranger in a land. At first we find him moving into the area around Sodom and Gomorrah.

Next time he is mentioned he is living inside the city gates. Finally we find that Lot is

Genesis 19:1: And there came two angels to Sodom at even; and Lot sat in the gate of Sodom

The gate of Sodom is where the official business of the city was conducted. In modern terms, we might say that Lot was on the city council of Sodom. He was trusted to manage the affairs of the city. He was a trusted advisor and judge. All of this was fine until he started to tell the people of Sodom that what they were doing was a sin. Then suddenly they turned on him and brought up the fact that Lot was an outsider.

Genesis 19:9: And they said, Stand back. And they said again, This one fellow came in to sojourn, and he will needs be a judge: now will we deal worse with thee, than with them. And they pressed sore upon the man, even Lot, and came near to break the door.

They were fine with Lot being an outsider when he was agreeing with them, but as soon as he started to tell them they were wrong Lot suddenly became an outsider. They immediately threw into his face the fact that “you’re not one of us.”

You should not be surprised when the world treats you as a stranger. The world is happy enough to allow you to sit and be their judge as long as you tell them that you agree with them. As long as you tell them that their sins are OK, you are their friend. But as soon as you start to judge them by God’s law, suddenly they will treat you as an outsider. They will tell you that they will allow you to keep your silly religious superstitions, but only so long as you keep it to yourself. Don’t be wishing people Merry Christmas; that is a religious holiday. You need to say, “Happy Holidays” because there are many Holidays that take place this time of year:

- The Druids and Wiccans have the winter solstice
- The Jews have Hanukkah
- They even made up a holiday called Kwanza to occur at this time of year

So to them, Christmas is just another one of many holidays that occur in December. They don't necessarily believe in any of them, but they don't want you to single out yours as though it is somehow better or different than the others. To them Christmas and all who celebrate it are outsiders who sojourn in the Land of the Free, but don't really belong here.

The thing is, on that last point they are right: we are sojourners in this land. Like Abraham and Moses, our promised land lies elsewhere. We live in this land and love it, but this is not our home. God has never intended His people to become too comfortable in any place where they live.

In the Promised Land, the land was not owned by anyone. Instead it was always owned by God and managed by someone. We see evidence of this in the fact that you could not sell land, but only lease it.

Leviticus 25:10: And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubile unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family.

So every 50 years the land has to return to the original owner.

Leviticus 25: 16: According to the multitude of years thou shalt increase the price thereof, and according to the fewness of years thou shalt diminish the price of it: for according to the number of the years of the fruits doth he sell unto thee.

So you can lease the land to someone, but you can't sell it. The price of the lease is determined by the number of years remaining on the 50-year lease.

Leviticus 25:23: The land shall not be sold for ever: for the land is mine, for ye are strangers and sojourners with me.

So God set it up so that even when the Israelites lived in the Promised Land, they still were strangers. God says, "...You are strangers and sojourners with me." God is Himself a stranger to this world. He visits here from time to time, but He does not belong here. He expects that we will likewise consider this world to be a temporary living space.

Esther

Esther was a woman living in Babylon who was chosen to become the queen. Yet when Haman tricked the king into signing a decree that all Jews should be killed, Esther was hesitant to do anything to save her people. After all, she was the queen. Yet it was her uncle/step father Mordecai who pointed out to her:

Esther 4:13: Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews.

In other words, “Don’t think that just because you are a queen you will escape this death sentence. You are still a Jew even though you live with the King.” Her ancestry came first. She was a sojourner in the land of Babylon. No matter how high she rose in social standing, she was still an outsider and subject to the laws for outsiders.

Joshua and Rahab

In the book of Joshua, we find that two men went to the city of Jericho to spy it out and find out what the place was like. While there the men stayed at the house of Rahab. She saved the men by letting them down outside the city walls through her window. Because of that she is regarded as a hero in the Bible because she saved the spies. Because of her bravery, she and her entire house was saved when the city fell to Joshua and his army.

Joshua 6:25: And Joshua saved Rahab the harlot alive, and her father's household, and all that she had; and she dwelleth in Israel even unto this day; because she hid the messengers, which Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.

But even more than a hero, Rahab was actually adopted into the Israelites as an equal. So a woman who owned a home in Jericho gave all that up to become a sojourner in the Promised Land. She gave up all that she possessed to become a resident in the land owned by God. In doing so she became the wife of Salmon and the ancestor of Boaz.

Matthew 1:5: And Salmon begat Booz of Rachab;

One of only a few women listed in the genealogy of Jesus, Rahab the harlot is mentioned because she gave all that she had to be a sojourner with God in the Promised Land.

Boaz, in turn adopted another non-Israelite into the family: he married Ruth the Moabite.

Ruth 4:13: So Boaz took Ruth, and she was his wife: and when he went in unto her, the LORD gave her conception, and she bare a son.

Ruth 4:21: And Salmon begat Boaz, and Boaz begat Obed,

Ruth 4:22: And Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David.

So two women who were not descendants of Jacob, Rahab and Ruth, left the homes that they knew to become strangers and aliens. They went from being citizens of this world to aliens and citizens of the Land of God. In so doing God made them both ancestors of King David, a man after God's heart. As ancestors of David, these women also became ancestors of Jesus.

God expects us to be just like Joshua, Rahab, and Ruth. We are called to leave behind our citizenship in this world to become resident aliens within it. We are called to give up all that we have in this world to live in a world where we are strangers. We are called to sojourn in this land.

Yet we are also called to bring others along on our journey. Just as Joshua saved Rahab and made her a resident of Israel, so we should call out those around us. We should call our friends, neighbors, and family to renounce their citizenship in this world to become sojourners and resident aliens in this land.

Jesus

Just like the women from whom he was descended, Jesus was himself an alien living in his world. First and foremost he was God living among men.

Isaiah 7:14: Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Matthew 1:23: Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

As God with us, Jesus is an alien resident among us. He lives among us, yet we are not like Him. Like the men of Sodom, we appreciate Jesus when he is nice to us and rules in our favor, but when he starts to judge against us and tell us our sins we turn on him.

- Jesus was born under Roman rule, yet he was not Roman: He was a Jew. As a Jew he was considered part of a conquered people, a people who existed at the whim of the Emperor.
- Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but he was not a Bethlehemite. In fact he had to be born in a stable because his family did not have anyone close enough in relation to them that they could stay in a home.
- His parents fled to Egypt out of fear of Herod, yet he was not an Egyptian.
- Joseph was a carpenter and it is quite likely that Jesus learned the skills of a carpenter from his father, yet we never hear that Jesus ever had that as an occupation.
- Jesus was a descendant of David, yet on earth he was not a king. In fact he actively discouraged anyone who even implied that he should become a king on earth.
- Jesus was the first born of Mary, yet we never hear that he owned the house in which she lived (as was the custom of the day.)

Jesus came to earth and lived as a resident alien among us. He was human, yet he was also God. As God he never forgot where His kingdom truly lay. His time on earth was spent trying to persuade the residents of this earth to give up their citizenship and become sojourners with him until they can reach their true home.

But we are also called to go to our friends and family and encourage them to give of their citizenship in this world as well. Like Rahab and Ruth, we are called to find our family in the people who share of love of the world to come.

Nobody tells you
when you get born here
how much you'll come to love it

and how you you'll never belong here.
So I'll call you my country
but I'll be lonely for my home.
I wish that I could take you there with me.

Lastly remember the words of Peter.

1 Peter 2:11: Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul;

1 Peter 2:12: Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.

1 Peter 2:15: For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men

So even though we are sojourners in this land and resident aliens in our own country, be good people. Recognize that the world will always be at odds with us, but we should not be at odds with this world.