Refugee Emphasis/World Refugee Day Worship Resources 2016

Provided through Disciples Refugee & Immigration Ministries

for SUNDAY, JUNE 19TH (Near World Refugee Day, on June 20th)—
or another selected “Refugee Welcome Sunday”

LITANY OF WELCOMING:
Leader: We journey into this special worship remembering your call for Abraham and Sarah to travel to
a new land so all families of the earth may be blessed.
People: God, help us bless those who have sacrificed and braved dangers to find
safety among us.
Leader: We seek, in this and every season, to strengthen as a faith family in our love for others, remembering
your words to “do no wrong to the stranger,” and growing to accept one another and ourselves.
People: God, strengthen us
to be family for newcomers we encounter, welcoming them and offering security
and hope through our community, even as you have welcomed us.
Leader: We gather as one, united from lives that are diverse, and recalling how you asked us to care for the
widow, the orphan, and the sojourner.
People: God, encourage us to know that whenever we share hospitality with others, we find in those
relationships opportunities to more deeply see your face and do your will.
ALL: Lord of grace and love, call us anew in this time to give witness to your heart of generosity.
Surround us fully with your love as we worship, so that the joy of your embrace might grow our
confidence to open arms wide to the needs of your world.

LECTIONARY BASED SERMON NOTES:
One of the lectionary texts for Sunday, June 19 is I Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15. This text, the story of Elijah and
the Lord, lends itself especially well to themes experienced by refugees.

In preaching the text, the pastor may wish to highlight:

1) Elijah was offered PROTECTION ON THE PATHWAY (through the angel’s provision of bread), and how we
may do so through our outreach to refugees in their critical needs;

2) Elijah needed REPEATED RESPONSES OF COMPASSIONATE COMPANIONSHIP from the angel before
continuing on his journey (i.e. AS THE ANGEL RECOGNIZED “the journey is too much for you, Elijah” and fed
him again in vs. 7-8), and how we can seek the SUSTAINED connections necessary for healing with refugees
and others who have experienced great trauma; and

3) Elijah received a CHARGE TO CHANGE AND TRANSFORM in vs. 15 that led him in full “reverse geography”
right back into his life location—where, from that same place, he nonetheless was asked to change the
leadership structures that existed! How might we also be being called to transform and change the
structures exactly where we are, by leading and acting and speaking differently—perhaps especially to support the vulnerable who are so often scapegoated in public rhetoric?

BACKGROUND NOTES: Already in Chapter 18, Ahab has labeled Elijah a “troubler of Israel,” (I Kgs. 18:17) and blamed him for Israel’s great drought. In response, Elijah insisted that Ahab was responsible, due to his nation’s following of the Baals, and turning from the Lord. Elijah urged Ahab to bring together all the prophets of Baal to determine what god has greater power, the gods of Baal or the God of Abraham, Yahweh. In great drama that unfolded through verses 30-41 of chapter 18, the gods of Baal refused to respond to demonstrate their power through fire, while Elijah showed the power of God to bring fire upon request to an altar. Defeated in the contest, the prophets of Baal were then killed by Elijah. Elijah then called Ahab to look for a rush of rain—another provision of God’s power—to come soon to the parched land, as well. The heavens opened up with rain, as Ahab rushes back to his home.

As chapter 19 in today’s passage opens, Ahab begins to tell his wife Jezebel about God’s great power shown in response to Elijah’s request. Undeterred, Jezebel threatens to take the life of Elijah—and Elijah in verse 3 flees to escape, until (in verse 4) he hides under a tree in the wilderness, expressing his fear of death by Jezebel’s violence. Parallels can be drawn with the nearly 20 million persons around the world who are sent out of their countries as refugees by threats; many of whom are forced to flee because of persecution related to their religion, as well as persecution due to race, national origin, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, and are unable to obtain protection within their home country. (This definition is defined through the Geneva Convention on Refugees.) In addition to this number, an additional 40 million are internally displaced within their own country. Here, Elijah has fled to the very southern corner of the promised land, to Beer-sheba. This location is as far away from Jezebel as he can go.

In his hiding for 40 days and 40 nights, Elijah’s experience of suffering and isolation reminds us of the story of any refugee family. (Invite a refugee here to share their own story of isolation during their escape, or search online for a story that will resonate with your community.) The faithful who hear Elijah’s experience (and that of refugees today) will also recall Israel’s wandering in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights as told in Numbers 14:33-34. Indeed, Elijah compares his journey and fear with those of his ancestors in verse 4. It is at his moment of greatest desperation, however, and also like that of the wandering Israelites in the wilderness, when God provides food and nourishment to him. In verses 6 and 7, an angel appears twice to Elijah, bringing food and comfort into his place of hiding, and encouraging him to move forward. Community members could be invited here to consider what policies our nation might offer, as well as what supplies and relationships of encouragement we may offer, to have a voice like the angel, to offer to those who are discouraged and deeply vulnerable in their journeys of loss. See the “Refugee Alert” provided through Refugees Welcome materials for policy support ideas—and ask refugees near your community what can best help fill their current needs. Is it assistance with a job? Hospitality kits for school, bath, bedding? Friendship, and listening? Neighborhood touring and introductions into your networks and community?

It may also be important to emphasize that it even took an angel more than once to get Elijah to dare to move beyond his discouragement and fear. Persons engaging with refugees are wise also to anticipate post-traumatic stress, and will be well served to be ready to commit to multiple, gradual, encouraging contacts in order to produce a lasting friendship. In verses 8 and 9, the text describes the ways that God’s offering of hospitality to Elijah in his difficulties nevertheless helps to move him step-by-step; providing strength enough through the days to reach Horeb, the mount of God, and then there finding a cave, again finding temporary respite there. Faith communities who wish to connect with refugees may also consider some of the various steps of encouragement they may offer to assist refugees in moving along their pathway to eventual integration, and great leadership in their new homeland.
The final portion of today’s text, in verses 15, helps to encourage Elijah, and instill his patience; as here is outlined the long term commitment of God to transform society and structures. Whereas the power of God had been demonstrated in the “god contest” of chapter 18 in a very visible and dramatic way through the fire, verses 11-15 highlight God’s sustaining efforts for healing and change in the world, which are sometimes far more quiet. God will next be calling upon Elijah (at the end of verse 15) to anoint Hazael as a new king over Aram. In verse 16, he’ll be asked to appoint Jehu as king over Israel, and also Elisha as prophet to take over for him. Such changes ahead are daunting, overwhelming, and exhausting. Again, the wealth of changes in Elijah’s life are comparable to the complete and consuming changes all refugees must face. Yet for Elijah, as for refugees—and indeed for us all—God will continue to work moment by moment, through political processes and personal relationships, and even with a small and sometimes silent voice, to change lives, and to change the world. Such a message leads us to pray with confidence for our God to continue to change the regimes, the international policies, the economic appetites, the extremism, the violence, and the quests for power that continue to produce refugees.

(Psalm 42 and 43, Galatians 3:23-29, and Luke 8:26-39 are also lectionary texts for the week. Psalm 42 may be quoted, as well, in expressing the types of pain experienced by refugees, and by Elijah, as well, as he flees to escape Jezebel’s wrath.)

CHILDREN’S SERMON, AND/OR COMMUNITY RITUAL:

As children gather (or as a full congregation), tell the story of Elijah in the I Kings 19:3-8, lectionary passage. Emphasize how Elijah was escaping for his life, as a refugee, and how he was sustained by God’s generosity and hospitality in feeding him. Invite folks to reflect on best ways they prepare for a guest’s arrival in their home, and how they might help care for refugees today who are seeking care and welcome.

Then, engage the children (or the full congregation) in an historical ritual of welcome, called a “Door Blessing.” Although the custom’s roots are often linked with Epiphany, this custom demonstrates throughout the year how God’s love and Jesus’ experience as a refugee so soon after his birth lead us into a new life of hospitality that seeks to consistently transform the character and depth of our “walk in faith.”

The life of Jesus—who was eager to eat with sinners, heal the blind, seek the lost, and ultimately walk towards the cross—challenges us to WELCOME ALL who enter into our doorways. Jesus’ life calls us to invite those in need to find the doorways of our homes and congregations, and to seek to serve the vulnerable anew each time we walk through the doorways of our homes and church.

Invite participants to walk to the doors of the church, and to read together this prayer, adapted from Worshipping With Children, on the day of your Refugees Welcome Worship:

God of doors and homes, bless this church (or our homes) this season and every season.
Bless all who come and go through this door, both those who live here and those who visit.
May all who enter through this door come in peace and bring joy.
May all who come to this door find welcome and love.
May all who exit this door share hospitality and hope.
May the love and joy in this home (or church) overflow and spread into the community and offer comfort to the world.

(Find the prayer and see additional information on the custom of “Door Blessing” at: http://worshipingwithchildren.blogspot.com/2013/11/year-epiphany-monday-january-6-2014-or.html http://liturgy.co.nz/epiphany-chalk-house-blessing-2.)

For questions and additional refugee resources, contact: Rev. Dr. Sharon Stanley-Rea, sstanley@dhm.disciples.org or 202-957-7826