

## Preaching from Sanctuary

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### Abstract

*In the midst of the tense immigration debates taking place in the United States, the authors share insights from a number of sermons preached by first-generation Hispanic immigrants as part of a preaching peer-group. The preachers delivered these messages in a church that was providing protective sanctuary for an undocumented immigrant who was a member of the peer-group. The sermons were developed and delivered for an imaginary audience of either Hispanic immigrants or native-born Anglo-Americans and offer prophetic words of both comfort and judgment.*

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### Gathering in The Garden

It was a Saturday morning in the spring, and Amor,<sup>1</sup> our first of six preachers for the day, had just taken her place at the pulpit, double-checked that her notes were in the right order, and launched into an introduction. This has become the usual rhythm of our Saturday mornings over the last few years as we have directed Duke Divinity School's Hispanic-Latino/a Preaching Initiative (HLPI), a Lilly Endowment funded project providing a peer-group learning experience for current and aspiring Hispanic-Latino/a preachers for whom traditional seminaries or divinity schools are often out of reach, in part due to issues related to their immigration status. We have spent many Saturday mornings watching our fellow preachers grow into their vocation as proclaimers of God's word. But this Saturday was different in several significant ways.

Rather than meeting in one of the classrooms at Duke Divinity School, we had gathered instead at The Garden, a multicultural United Methodist congregation in the Durham area.

We had come out of solidarity. We had come for Elías. Like several other HLPI participants over the years, Elías was an undocumented immigrant. He first came to the United States from Mexico more than twenty years earlier as a laborer in eastern North Carolina's agricultural sector. Eventually, he found work as a skilled installer of insulation and sheet rock. More significantly, he

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<sup>1</sup> In writing this paper, the authors have utilized *Luke Eric Lassiter's* collaborative model for ethnography as described in "The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography". Foremost among the commitments Lassiter enumerates for researchers is "an ethical and moral responsibility to consultants" that takes precedence over the quest for knowledge. Given the immigration status of many of our collaborators, we have chosen to employ pseudonyms for each of them as well as for the congregations in which they have served or gathered. Although this choice does present certain problems of its own (the authors are aware of the irony of presenting a "collaborative" work in which their names are the only real names to appear), the current immigration policies of the United States require us to use the utmost care when protecting the identities of our collaborators and friends. Cf. *Luke Eric Lassiter, The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*, Chicago 2005, 79.

married another immigrant who gave birth to their son, and their family came to faith and grew to fill leadership roles within a local congregation.

Elías had always been the primary breadwinner for his family due to the devastating case of Lupus his wife had been battling for years. Four years previously during a trip to Mexico to visit a sick family member, Elías's wife's health deteriorated dramatically. She re-entered the United States in order to undergo a life-saving heart operation in January of 2014. Elías came soon after but was apprehended by the Border Patrol and detained for a brief time until the details of his story—a desperately ill spouse and a U.S. citizen son—could be confirmed. Following Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) priorities in place at that time, Elías was released and given a work permit to be able to provide for his family, which he did faithfully for the next three years.

Once a year, Elías had renewed his temporary work permit without issue until the summer of 2017, when his application was denied. This rejection was one incident within a larger overall movement in the United States against immigration, both documented and undocumented, that has grown dramatically in recent years

### **Immigrants in Crisis**

According to the Pew Research Center, the U.S. foreign-born population reached a record high of 43.2 million in 2015, with immigrants from almost every country in the world.<sup>2</sup> Research shows that “immigrants today account for 13.4% of the U.S. population, nearly triple the share (4.7%) in 1970.”<sup>3</sup> The majority of immigrants (76%) are in the country legally, while a quarter are undocumented.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of their immigration status, immigrants contribute in many positive ways to this country, including their significant role in offsetting what would otherwise be a stark “decline in the working-age population by adding about 18 million people of working age between 2015 and 2035.”<sup>5</sup>

In spite of the positive outcomes related to immigration, current U.S. President Donald Trump has frequently pointed to immigration as one of the factors he believes stands in the way of making America “great again.” Julia G. Young affirms this negative focus on immigration:

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<sup>2</sup> *Gustavo López/Kristin Bialik*, Key Findings About U.S. Immigrants, Pew Research Center (May 3, 2017), <http://pewrsr.ch/2qz2zvx>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

Since the very first week of the new administration, when the president released three executive orders, two to crack down on undocumented immigration and one to restrict travel from Muslim-majority nations and to cut the US refugee admissions program, the Trump administration has made it very clear that its vision for American greatness is a nativist one.<sup>6</sup>

Although the rhetoric has heated up considerably in the last few years, a crackdown against unauthorized immigration in the U.S. existed even before Trump administration. According to the Pew Research Center, “The Obama administration deported about 3 million immigrants between 2009 and 2016, a significantly higher number than the 2 million immigrants deported by the Bush administration between 2001 and 2008.”<sup>7</sup> Throughout President Trump’s first year in office, arrests of undocumented immigrants increased by roughly 30 percent (from 110,104 to 143,470).<sup>8</sup>

### Seeking Sanctuary

Elías appealed the decision denying the renewal of his work permit based on his family’s situation, but his requests seemed to fall on deaf ears. After exhausting all of his other available options, Elías entered into protective sanctuary at The Garden in December of 2017.

The sanctuary movement in the United States currently comprises more than 700 individual congregations that have pledged themselves to protect and stand in solidarity with immigrants facing deportation.<sup>9</sup> Erin Guzman describes the origins of the movement in *The Christian Century* as a response to humanitarian needs and a concern for justice:

In the 1970-80s, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua were rife with civil war. [...] The conflicts prompted thousands of Central Americans to migrate North to the U.S. hoping to find temporary stay and safety. This is the context in which the modern Sanctuary Movement was born.<sup>10</sup>

In this current age of sanctuary, at least forty-five undocumented immigrants have taken refuge in churches across the United States so far. Five of these individuals are in North Carolina.

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<sup>6</sup> Julia G. Young, Making American 1920 Again? Nativism and U.S. Immigration, Past and Present, in: *Journal on Immigration and Human Society*, Vol. 5 No. 1 (2017), 218.

<sup>7</sup> López/Bialik (note 2).

<sup>8</sup> Fiscal Year 2017 ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations Report, in: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, <https://www.ice.gov/removal-statistics/2017> (accessed August 1, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> “Sanctuary,” Beloved Community, at: <https://belovedcommunity.online/sanctuary/> (accessed August 1, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Erin Guzmán, Reviving the Sanctuary Movement, in: *The Christian Century* (December 29, 2016), <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/revivingsanctuary>.

Advocates of the Sanctuary movement look to scripture to authorize their actions, drawing inspiration from Old Testament passages detailing the ethical treatment of “foreigners” and New Testament passages like the parable of the Good Samaritan in which Jesus provides an example of extending grace and hospitality to those who are in need even if it goes against the norms of society.

### **Preaching in Sanctuary**

Elías had informed us of his immigration difficulties early in the fall of 2017, not long after he had begun participating in that year’s cohort. Alma Ruiz, one of this paper’s co-authors and a member of The Garden, was instrumental in working with the leadership of the congregation and the North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church to facilitate Elías’s relocation to The Garden, where Elías still lived at the time this article was written. During his time there, Elías used his construction skills to renovate the lower level of the church’s facilities, but he wanted to continue developing his homiletical skills as well and asked us how he could continue to participate in HLPI.

We approached this issue cautiously since several other HLPI participants were also undocumented immigrants or DACA<sup>11</sup> recipients. Asking them to come regularly to a location that was a known provider of sanctuary could potentially place them at some risk as well. Ultimately, they all expressed a desire to relocate to The Garden as a way to support Elías during his ordeal. Over the following months, we not only preached for one another, but we also celebrated birthdays, Christmas, and Easter. Our celebration of Epiphany was particularly memorable as one of our members from Mexico brought a *rosca* – a round ring of sweet bread from which everyone takes a slice. One of the slices contains a figurine of the baby Jesus – his concealment representing the time period during which the Holy Family fled into exile as refugees. Even during our celebrations, we could not help but return to themes of migration and redemption.

During our preaching sessions, however, we found that many of our participants were hesitant to preach from passages related to immigration justice or to refer to their own immigration experiences at all. This was true even of Elías, whose immigration story was already well known. When asked why he was hesitant to include references to immigration in his sermons, Elías responded:

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<sup>11</sup> Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) came into existence on June 15, 2012 as a program offering deferred action for certain immigrants who were brought to the United States as children and met several guidelines. The deferral period would be for two years and was subject to renewal. DACA participants received official documentation that allowed them to pursue their education and work in the same way that resident aliens could. Under the Trump administration, DACA was rescinded on September 5, 2017. This action is still being litigated and the future of DACA remains uncertain.

Cf. Consideration of Deferred Action of Childhood Arrivals, at: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, <https://www.uscis.gov/archive/consideration-deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-daca> (accessed August 1, 2018).

“No. Si hablo de esas cosas, van a pensar que solo estoy diciéndolo por mi propia situación.”<sup>12</sup> “No. If I talk about those things, they are going to think that I am only saying it because of my own situation.”

This experience led the authors to change the format for the last round of sermons that year’s cohort would be preparing and preaching for one another. We began with a workshop in which the cohort members brainstormed the homiletical possibilities of various scriptural passages touching on human migration. At the end of the session, each member chose a passage around which she or he would develop a sermon with an intended audience of either Anglo-Americans or Hispanic-Latino/a individuals. Having different imagined audiences allowed the participants to reflect upon the various roles they often occupied as preachers, as either bearers of good news during troubled times to their own congregations or as prophetic voices speaking to the Anglo-American constituency within their denomination (or even to the members of an Anglo-American congregation with which they shared facilities). The remainder of this paper focuses on the various ways in which the participants proclaimed God’s word regarding immigration to these disparate audiences.

### **Good News for Troubled Times**

Although the preachers who were speaking to Hispanic-Latino/a audiences all chose different texts and approached them from unique vantage points, there were also several ways in which their sermons overlapped. The gospel for oppressed immigrants took three principal forms during our final preaching session. It was good news 1) that God himself was on their side, 2) that they had one another for support, and 3) that they had a role in being and bearing good news for others.

### ***The Presence and Provision of God***

The most common form of good news our collaborators proclaimed was the steady presence and provision of God for those suffering due to their immigration status. In the introduction to her sermon, María assured her hearers of the goodness and unfailing provision of God in the midst of turmoil. According to Deut 10:18, God is the one “who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.” Building upon this image,

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<sup>12</sup> Another key commitment of collaborative ethnography is for the researcher to engage in clearer and more accessible writing in order to facilitate “open dialogue about interpretation and representation.” In keeping with this commitment and because we believe that every act of translation is also an act of interpretation, we will first present all quotations and sermon excerpts in the language in which our collaborators spoke them before also presenting our translation of them in English. Cf. *Lassiter* (note 1), 132.

María began enumerating the many in ways in which her audience had experienced God's love for the stranger:

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| Sabemos que Dios ha sido bueno. Sabemos que Dios está con nosotros. Sabemos que sus promesas se han cumplido. Lo hemos visto. Lo hemos palpado entre nosotros. Y le damos la honra y la gloria a nuestro Dios. Hemos visto que no nos ha dejado y no nos dejará. | We know that God has been good. We know that God is with us. We know that his promises have been fulfilled. We have seen it. We have felt it within ourselves. And we give the honor and glory to our God. We have seen that he has not abandoned us and will not abandon us. |
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As María spoke these words, the volume of her voice increased with each assertion. The actual congregation of eleven other first-generation immigrants nodded their heads in affirmation. A few joined their voices to María's, saying "Amén" and "Gloria a Dios / Glory to God."

Elías also had chosen to preach to a Hispanic-Latino/a audience, and he chose for his text Gen 12 in which the Lord calls Abram to leave the territory of his ancestors to travel to an unknown land. This command also comes with promises of blessing and provision for Abram, and Elías grounded his and Abram's trust in these promises in the faithfulness of God:

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| Vemos que Dios – lo que Él dice, Él lo cumple porque no es Dios de mentira. Es un Dios de verdad. Porque siguiendo la descendencia de Abram llegamos al nacimiento de Jesucristo. Mateo 1 capítulo 1 nos dice: "Libro de la genealogía de Jesucristo, hijo de David, hijo de Abraham." | We see that God – what He says, He accomplishes because He is not a God of lies. He is a God of truth. Because following the descent of Abram we arrive at the birth of Jesus Christ. Matthew 1 chapter 1 says: Book of the Genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham." |
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Elías saw the distant birth of Christ as the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to Abram, and he also understood it to be further evidence that he could trust God in the midst of his own circumstances. By the time he preached this sermon, Elías had been living in the basement of The Garden for four months. He had only been able to see his wife and son on weekends, and he was going to miss his son's high school graduation. And yet, he believed that God's promises to him of continued presence and provision would also be fulfilled. His faith rested not only on Abram's experience but also on his identification as one of Abram's descendants:

Es preocupante lo que está pasando ahorita en este país con las leyes migratorias. Pero si confiamos en Dios no tenemos por que preocuparnos porque Dios ya nos dio la victoria. Porque somos parte de esa descendencia de Abram. Por eso hermanos les digo – diga lo que diga el gobierno de este país, haga lo que haga – Dios está con nosotros. Y si Dios está con nosotros, ¿quién contra nosotros?

What is happening right now in this country with its immigration laws is worrying. But if we trust in God, we have no reason to worry because God has already given us the victory. Because we are part of that genealogy of Abram. That is why I tell you brothers – say what they say the government of this country, do what they do – God is with us. And if God is with us, who can be against us?

It was a stirring declaration from Elías, who was usually a fairly reserved preacher. Yet here he stood, not far from the bed in which he had slept for more than a hundred nights during his resistance against the overwhelming power of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, declaring that his victory was a foregone conclusion. God was with him and with his hearers.

### ***The Power of Identification***

For many undocumented immigrants, the experience of living in the United States without official recognition involves an attendant loss of identity. Timothy L. Smith writes that “the search for community and identity in a world of strangers” becomes a primary quest “the moment the nearest range of hills shut out the view of the emigrant’s native valley.”<sup>13</sup> The sense of loss that Smith identifies surfaced in Teresa’s sermon as she spoke poignantly of the pain accompanying transitions in culture and identity for many immigrants.

Nos sentimos lejos de nuestras raíces, lejos de nuestra cultura. Nos sentimos que perdemos nuestra identidad para poder formar parte de esta cultura. A veces hasta dejamos nuestras creencias para poder entrar en un nuevo sistema social. A veces cambiamos nuestros nombres—Juan por John, Miguel por Michael.

We feel far away from our roots, far from our culture. We feel that we lose our identity in order to form part of this culture. Sometimes we leave behind our beliefs in order to enter into a new social system. Sometimes we change our names—John in place of Juan, Michael in place of Miguel.

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<sup>13</sup> Timothy L. Smith, Religion and Ethnicity in America, in: The American Historical Review 83, no. 5 (1978), 1174.

While this is true to some degree for all immigrants, those living without documentation often experience other losses of identity as well. Amor, a DACA recipient, spoke poignantly of the moment when she became aware of her problematic status as an undocumented immigrant:

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| Mis papás me trajeron aquí cuando yo tenía cuatro años. Cruzamos la frontera y yo no me acuerdo cuando ni como. Mis recuerdos de mi infancia son que yo ya estaba aquí, que yo crecí aquí. Cuando yo quería seguir con mis estudios [en una universidad] me di cuenta que no tenía papeles. Hasta ese momento, yo había pensado que era una persona normal. Fue algo duro para mí. Me ofrecieron becas por mis grados, pero ninguna [universidad] me pudo aceptar por no ser residente. Fue un golpe difícil. | My parents brought me here when I was four years old. We crossed the border and I do not remember when or how. My memories from childhood are that I was here, that I grew up here. When I wanted to continue on with my studies [in a university] I found out that I did not have papers. Until that moment, I thought I was a normal person. It was something hard for me. They offered me scholarships for my grades, but none [of the universities] could accept me because I was not a resident. It was a difficult blow. |
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As Amor spoke, several others in the room nodded their heads. They might not have been DACA recipients themselves, but many of them experienced similar moments in which the illusion of their belonging had been cruelly pierced by the reality of their status.

### ***The Importance of Being Good News for Others***

Amor stepped to the pulpit and read 2Cor 8:13-15, recounting Paul's words regarding the need for balance between abundance and need in the early church. We expected Amor to focus on the abundance experienced by Anglo-Americans and the needs of immigrant communities, but she surprised us with her subsequent words:

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| Trabajo en el departamento de la salud pública, y muchos de ellos dicen, "Esos ilegales no mas vienen a agarrar nuestros servicios. Están robando nuestra ayuda." Para mí es bien difícil oír eso. Entonces lo que hago es orar por ellos. | I work in the department of public health, and many people there say, "Those illegals only come to take our services. They are stealing our help." For me, it is very difficult to hear that. So what I do is to pray for them. |
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Una de esas personas que hablaba mucho era mi jefa. Una vez salimos a almorzar y salió el tema como siempre. Yo decía, “Dios mío ayúdame a mantener mi calma y mi paz. Ayúdame para que seas tú quien habla por que, si no, voy a perder mi trabajo.”

One of those people who talked a lot was my boss. One time we went to lunch and the subject came up like always. I said, “My God, help me to maintain my calm and my peace. Help me so that it is you who speaks because, if not, I am going to lose my job.”

Entonces, ella me dijo, “¿Tienes algo? Te veo estresada.” Y le dije, “Sí, tengo algo. Ahorita con lo de las elecciones...” Y me interrumpió, preguntando, “Ah sí, ¿por quien vas a votar?” Y yo dije, “Por nadie. Yo no tengo derecho para votar.” Y se quedó [callada].

So, she said to me, “Is something wrong? You seem stressed.” And I said, “Yes, something is wrong. Right now with the elections...” and she interrupted me, asking, “Oh yes, who are you going to vote for?” And I said, “For nobody. I do not have the right to vote.” And she sat there [quiet].

Amor recounted telling her boss about her fears of losing her work permit if DACA were to be withdrawn, of potentially being separated from the family she had formed and nurtured here in the United States. Her boss was deeply moved by Amor’s words:

Y empezó a llorar conmigo. Y me dijo, “No lo puedo creer. ¿Tú no tienes papeles? [...] Nunca imaginé en mi vida que tú no tuvieras papeles. Hablas perfecto inglés, eres muy inteligente, estás estudiando ...”

And she began to cry with me. And she said, “I cannot believe it. You do not have papers? [...] I never in my life imagined that you would not have papers. You speak English perfectly, you are very intelligent, you are studying ...”

Yo dije, “Eso es el problema, que, como personas, como seres humanos, no nos tomamos el tiempo de ver verdaderamente a quien tenemos al lado.”

I said, “That is the problem, that, as people, as human beings, we do not take the time to truly see who we have at our side.”

In Amor’s story, her boss was guilty of obliviousness – guilty still, even in this moment of revelation, of clinging to gross generalizations regarding the character and abilities of undocumented immigrants. She needed to “take the time” to truly see the people around her. Rhetorically, however, this story functioned not to condemn members of the dominant culture for

their sins, but to awaken immigrants of faith to their calling as ministers of reconciliation. After all, Amor was preaching to an immigrant audience, and her message was that the dominant culture, in spite of its seeming abundance, was actually in need of redemption for its sins of pride and obliviousness. According to her view, immigrants were not merely victims of an unjust system – they were among those who might best embody the gospel by following the path of Christ in the midst of suffering. They were not just those huddled within the sanctuary offered by The Garden – they were also like those early Christians huddled together in the second chapter of Acts, who – once filled with the power of the Holy Spirit – might go forth and usher in a new kingdom, redeeming even their oppressors from the sin in which they had become ensnared.

### **A Prophetic Word to the Dominant Culture**

Just as the sermons delivered for an imagined Hispanic-Latino/a audience highlighted common themes, those developed for Anglo-Americans also shared significant areas of overlap. Most of our collaborators focused their messages toward one of the following ends: 1) bearing witness to current suffering, 2) pointing out the importance of the ministry of reconciliation, or 3) offering a warning of coming judgment.

### ***Humanizing the Issue***

Several of our collaborators sought to push back against the portrayal of immigrants as a faceless, invading horde by offering a more personal portrait of undocumented immigrants. José Luís did this in a particularly clever way, beginning his sermon with a catalogue of well-known Americans who had broken immigration laws. He mentioned Arnold Schwarzenegger, the famous actor, former governor of California, and Austrian immigrant who had worked for a construction company in violation of the terms of his tourist visa. Next, he spoke about Michael J. Fox, the entertainment icon and Canadian immigrant, who had also once been an undocumented worker. Finally, he mentioned the well-known dog behaviorist and television personality César Millán, who came to the United States from Mexico without documentation.

José Luís followed this introduction by reading his chosen scripture, Lev 19:33-34 which not only condemns the oppression of aliens but also requires that the Israelites “love the alien as [themselves].”<sup>14</sup> At this point, those of us in the audience expected José Luís to share his own story as an immigrant and were surprised when he instead began to speak of his struggle when he was still in his native Argentina to understand those who immigrated from other countries:

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<sup>14</sup> Lev 19:34, NRSV.

Yo recuerdo, por ejemplo, en Argentina una vez conocí a un muchacho que vino de Perú. El había inmigrado porque su país tenía poco trabajo, y lamentablemente no tenía por sostener a su familia. Y quizás en ese tiempo no lo entendí. Y eso es lo que relaciono muchas veces con el ciudadano americano. Si ellos se han criado acá y si viven acá, a veces no pueden verlo con la misma lente que los inmigrantes porque no han sufrido aquí en su lugar de origen. En ese momento, yo estaba en Argentina en mi lugar de origen y no entendía como un señor de otro país, de Perú, podía dejar toda la familia para venir a trabajar. No entendía eso.

I remember, for example, in Argentina one time I met a young man who came from Peru. He had immigrated because his country had little work, and unfortunately he did not have enough to sustain his family. And maybe back then I did not understand. And that is what I often relate to the American citizen. If they have been raised here and live here, sometimes they cannot see through the same lens as immigrants do because they have not suffered here in their place of origin. Back then, I was in Argentina in my place of origin and I did not understand how a man from another country, from Peru, could leave his whole family to come and work. I did not understand that.

It had been easy for José Luís to misunderstand the plight of an immigrant when he had been comfortable in his country of origin. He recognized that most U.S. citizens would never have an experience of immigration like his to reorient their vision, but he said that forming a real friendship with an immigrant could provide a similar result. Over time, his friendship with a Peruvian immigrant had transcended the gulf in his understanding. He had grown to love an alien as himself and he would never look at immigration the same way again.

### ***A History Lesson***

Marisol began her sermon by reading her chosen text from the second chapter of Ephesians in which Paul describes the Gentiles as “being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”<sup>15</sup> In the face of this alienation, the mediating work of Christ transforms the Gentiles into “saints and also members of the household of God” thus making one people of two.<sup>16</sup> Then she segued into a story about a former teacher she had known in Mexico City:

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<sup>15</sup> Eph 2:12, NRSV.

<sup>16</sup> Eph 2:19, NRSV.

Cuando yo era más chica y estaba en “middle school,” tenía una maestra muy apasionada por la historia. Siempre decía que aprender historia era importante. Pero no sólo aprender fechas y nombres, no. Siempre decía, “Quien no conoce el pasado está condenado a repetir los mismos errores en el futuro.”

When I was much younger and I was in middle school, I had a teacher who was very passionate about history. She always said that learning history was important. But not just learning dates and names, no. She always said, “Whoever does not know the past is condemned to repeat the same mistakes in the future.”

In spite of her teacher’s warning, Marisol only focused on memorizing the names and dates which would help her pass her tests while overlooking the connections between the people and historical movements she was studying. When she was thirty years old, however, Marisol came to the United States as an undocumented immigrant and began to see things from a radically different perspective. She described the difficulty of her immigration as a blessing in disguise which allowed her to understand the pain of displacement and of packing an entire life into a single suitcase. Then she proceeded to help her imagined Anglo-American audience locate themselves within the scripture she had read:

Los de la circuncisión sigan siendo conocidos hoy como las clases privilegiadas. Aquellos de nosotros que somos mayoría. Aquellos de nosotros que tenemos la piel más clara. Aquellos de nosotros que somos ciudadanos de este país y tenemos derecho al voto y nos decimos ser fieles cristianos. Y aquellos – los incircuncisos – aquellos de nosotros que somos minorías. Aquellos de nosotros que tenemos la piel más oscura. Los que no tenemos un estatus legal en este país y vivimos en las sombras con temor.

Those of the circumcision continue being known today as the privileged classes. Those of us who are in the majority. Those of us who have lighter skin. Those of us who are citizens of this country and have the right to vote and who call ourselves faithful Christians. And those – the uncircumcised – those of us who are minorities. Those of us who have darker skin. Those who do not have legal status in this country and live in the shadows in fear.

Marisol was careful all through this section of her sermon to use inclusive language, continually speaking to “those of us” rather than “those of you.” At this point, Marisol returned to the story of her middle school history teacher’s lesson on the importance of knowing history. She reflected on the ways in which cities and nations have built walls and fortifications for protection from

foreign invasion and influence. Then she discussed the ways in which we do the same thing as individuals, fencing in our property for privacy from those around us. But finding these physical fences to be insufficient to shield us from others whom we deem too different, we erect other barriers as well:

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| Empezamos a levantar murallas emocionales – murallas de odio, de injusticia, de egoísmo, de apatía hacia aquellos que son diferentes. Y los muros cada vez son mas altos. Y cada vez son mas anchos. Y no nos dejan ver más allá. Y no nos dejan hacer lo que Cristo nos ha enviado a hacer a cada uno de nosotros | We begin to raise up emotional walls – walls of hatred, of injustice, of selfishness, of apathy toward those who are different. And each time the walls are taller. And each time they are wider. And they do not allow us to see over there. And they do not allow us to do what Christ has sent us to do—each one of us. |
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These walls, Marisol assured us, needed to be torn down just as desperately as did the walls that stood between Jews and Gentiles in the first century. They could only be torn down by believers who would move past the easy aspects of Christianity and truly allow themselves to be troubled by the suffering of their brothers and sisters:

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| No seamos uno cuando las cosas son fáciles, cuando los problemas de otros no crucen el muro de mi jardín y empiezan a incomodar mi casa y empiezan a invadir la zona en que yo estoy cómodo. ¡Incomódate hermano! ¡Incomódate hermana! Deja que el espíritu santo entre en tu corazón. Incomódate y deja que [el espíritu] derrumba todos esos muros, todas esas barreras que tu mismo has levantado. Y con las piedras que quedan, deja que Cristo construya un edificio con cimientos nuevos. | Let us not be one when things are easy, when the problems of others do not cross the wall into my yard and begin to inconvenience my house and begin to invade the zone in which I am comfortable. Give up your comfort brother! Give up your comfort sister! Allow the holy spirit to enter your heart. Give up your comfort and allow [the spirit] to tear down all those walls, all those barriers that you yourself have raised up. And with the rocks that remain, allow Christ to construct a building with a new foundation. |
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### ***A Warning of Coming Judgment***

When we were selecting our passages, Joaquín immediately settled on Ex 12:49, which declares that “there shall be one law for the native and for the alien who resides among you.” The immediate

context for this mandate is the observance of the first Passover in which aliens were welcome to participate if they also had been circumcised. Joaquín, however, reflected more broadly on the placement of this verse and the Passover meal itself within the series of devastating plagues visited upon the Egyptians who, as the dominant culture in the text, had oppressed the Hebrew people with laws that treated natives and aliens in vastly different ways. Throughout his sermon, Joaquín drew a subtle line between the actions of the Egyptians and their leaders and the actions of U.S. citizens and their leaders.

Joaquín preached this particular message toward the end of April, 2018. Just a few weeks earlier, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security had implemented drastic changes in its border policy. According to section 1325(a) of the U.S. Code, improper entry into the United States has always been addressed with civil penalties, including fines of between \$50 and \$250.<sup>17</sup> Aliens found to have entered the U.S. without proper documentation were deported, but not charged with criminal activity. Beginning on April 6, 2018, U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions issued a memo requiring the Justice Department to “prosecute all Department of Homeland Security referrals of section 1325(a) violations.”<sup>18</sup> This policy meant that all aliens apprehended along the Southwest border and suspected of improper entry would thenceforth be treated as criminals. In order to hold adult aliens in federal custody long enough to be able to prosecute them, the Justice Department also began taking their children from them and housing them in separate detention centers. This practice certainly opened a gulf between the treatment of natives and aliens.

Joaquín stated clearly that the United States was not living up to Ex 12:49 in its current treatment of undocumented immigrants in the United States. He described this new country in which he lived as “una tierra prometida / a promised land” and a nation that had been blessed by God, but that blessing could not be taken for granted:

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| Si Ud. y yo no estamos cumpliendo lo que dice la escritura, Dios no puede bendecirnos más allá de lo que ya nos ha bendecido. El quiere bendecirnos más pero si nosotros no estamos haciendo su voluntad de hacer una sola ley para el extranjero entre nosotros, Dios puede detener la bendición. Y puede dársela a aquellos que están abrazando su palabra. | If you and I are not fulfilling what the scripture says, God cannot bless us beyond how he has already blessed us. He wants to bless us more but if we are not doing his will in having just one law for the foreigner among us, God can hold back his blessing. And he can give it to those who are embracing his word. |
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<sup>17</sup> These penalties are spelled out in the U.S. Code, Title 8, Chapter 12, Subchapter II, Part VIII, Section 1325. Cf. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/8/1325>.

<sup>18</sup> Attorney General Announces Zero-Tolerance Policy for Criminal Illegal Entry, in: The United States Department of Justice, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/attorney-general-announces-zero-tolerance-policy-criminal-illegal-entry>.

## Conclusion

What then can be made of these sermons preached from sanctuary? Given the vast power of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security deployed against them, what possible impact can a few immigrant preachers gathered in solidarity have on the current state of immigration policy in the United States? We do not know, but these are not the first followers of Christ who gathered together in fear before going forth in power. They will all continue to preach – they and many others – calling their congregations to remember the presence and power of God in their midst, to stand in solidarity with one another, and to provide a faithful witness to those who see them as something less than bearers of God’s own image. They will preach, when granted the opportunity, to members of the very dominant culture that oppresses them, humanizing the demonized, offering gracious lessons in history and theology, and speaking a word of warning to those who might listen.

In this work of collaborative ethnography, our purpose has been to find a wider audience for their words and their embodied witness – to amplify their message so that it carries beyond the brick walls of The Garden. We believe that their message is needed both to provide hope to the hopeless and sight to the blind. It is our desire that their words and witness move others in the way they have moved us.

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