# Our God is Undocumented:
# Biblical Reflections on the New Sanctuary Movement

By Ched Myers

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I begin with an old story. There was a Levite from a village far away in the hill country of Ephraim who was traveling through Judah returning home. He and his party were near Jerusalem and it was getting late, and his companions said, "Let us spend the night here." But the Levite said, "We do not belong to this people; we will continue on."

> So they passed by and went on their way; and the sun went down on them near Gibeah, which belongs to Benjamin. They turned aside there, to go in and spend the night at Gibeah. He went in and sat down in the open square of the city, but no one took them in to spend the night. At evening there was an old man coming from his work in the field. The man was from the hill country of Ephraim, and he was residing in Gibeah. When the old man looked up and saw the wayfarer in the open square of the city, he said, 'Where are you going and where do you come from?' He answered him, 'We are passing from Bethlehem in Judah to the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, from which I come… Nobody has offered to take me in… The old man said, 'Peace be to you. I will care for all your wants; only do not spend the night in the square.' So he brought him into his house, and fed the donkeys; they washed their feet, and ate and drank. (Judges 19:14-21)

Rembrandt van Rijn, "Man of Gibeah offers hospitality to the Levite," 1645

This is a simple tale of hospitality, offered by an immigrant to an immigrant. And it speaks to the heart of our task of building a New Sanctuary Movement.

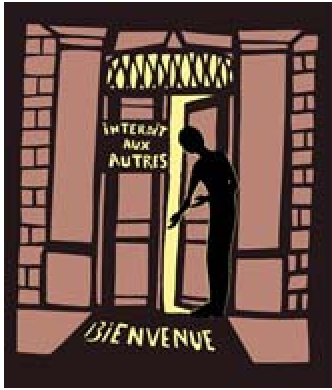
## I.  The Legacy of Sanctuary

> *The stranger has not lodged in the street; I have opened my doors to the sojourner…" (Job 31:32)*

The New Sanctuary movement is near and dear to my heart.  Twenty five years ago the Christian community of which I was part had the opportunity to help get the Sanctuary movement started in the Bay area.  I remember hosting a Guatemalan human rights activist named Rigoberta Menchu (*left*) in our home in Berkeley in 1981. She made tortillas on a little *horno* in our backyard, and spoke of the war my country was fighting in her homeland. Years later she would win the Nobel Peace Prize for her courageous advocacy for justice.

The Sanctuary movement of the 1980s deeply shaped activists of my generation. It sought to put a human face on Central America's overt and covert wars by transporting refugees to safety, and sheltering them in churches along the way. Many of its leaders were my mentors—elders like Luis Olivares and Jim Corbett and Gloria Kinsler.  Some church leaders were indicted by the government for their role, but eventually our movement put an end to those wars.  Of course, the first Sanctuary movement was not the first "underground railroad" in our country's history.  We stand in a long legacy of faith and conscience in America: Abolitionist Christians who challenged 300 years of slavery, Catholics who fed and clothed refugees, Quakers who stood with Japanese Americans being sent to internment camps, and Methodist reformers, such as some of the pastor here today.

It is a blessing to be part of another small Christian community now which is helping organize the New Sanctuary movement, through the work of Alice Linsmeier.  It is *not*, however, a blessing that we are facing most of the same human rights issues a quarter of a century later (*right, woman reacting to deportation of her relatives*).  Today the war in poor countries is more economic than military, but the casualties are the same: families pushed and pulled from their homes by the displacing forces of globalization, their rights and dignity sacrificed to our demand for cheap food and services.  We are again confronting a painful landscape of human suffering, which again offers our religious congregations an urgent opportunity to practice our faith.  Will we, like the old man in the Bible story, refuse to ignore the immigrants who are stranded in our village square, people who are profoundly marginalized by social and economic factors beyond their control?  Will we offer what the New Sanctuary movement is calling "prophetic hospitality"?




The word for “hospitality” in the Greek New Testament is *philoxenos*, meaning “love for the foreigner.” Our English word comes from Latin roots that originally connoted a room set aside for the guest or stranger. Will our religious congregations have the courage and conviction to “set aside” a little of the space in our hearts and homes for immigrants seeking Sanctuary today?

I want to remind us that, as people of faith, the hotly debated issues of immigration are not just social concerns, about which United Methodists have a long tradition of sensitivity. They are also finally *theological* concerns. Unfortunately, our congregations and even church leaders are often swayed or intimidated by the widespread and powerful currents of popular opinion in the U.S. that tolerate discrimination against, and advocate for criminalization of, undocumented immigrants. To resist these pressures, and to stand more firmly in our tradition of conscience, it will be important to remember two basic aspects of biblical consciousness that should figure into our decisions regarding this new moment of Sanctuary.

## II. The God of the Bible is Undocumented

> *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing this some have entertained angels without knowing it. (Heb 13:2)*

This theological assertion may seem startling at first, but upon reflection it is obvious. Does not the Creator move and act in the world in ways that are utterly unauthorized by any state, across political borders and underneath official radar? Our scriptures attest to this, from beginning to end portraying God as entering our world in the guise of a stranger in need of hospitality.

One of the first divine epiphanies in the biblical story occurs when God appears to Abraham—who has heeded God’s call to become an immigrant, leaving his home in Mesopotamia to journey to the land of Canaan (Gen 18:1ff). Abraham and Sarah offer shelter and a meal to three strangers, who turn out to be divine representatives. They respond with a blessing on the old couple which commences the biblical narrative of Israel.

And at the end of our scriptures, in Revelation 3, Christ is portrayed as the stranger seeking shelter: “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you…” (Rev 3:20)

Throughout the literature between these two images God is portrayed as “undocumented.” In the Exodus tradition, God doesn’t even have a *name*, much less papers: the moniker Yahweh means “I will be whoever I will be” (Ex 3:14f). This God appears to the Hebrews in a burning bush, far *outside* the borders of

Pharaoh's empire—a social and economic system they were at the bottom of. And this God led the Israelites out of Egypt "in haste"—just as political refugees must flee today (Ex 12:33)—and into a wilderness freedom in which they wandered as a refugee people who had no legal status, but who bore a divine covenant.

Jesus, too, was undocumented. The inauguration of the gospel story finds him and his family fleeing violence as political refugees, pushed around Palestine by the imperial forces of Caesar and Herod. Each Advent Catholics throughout Mexican America commemorate this story in the public liturgy of Posadas, which enacts the bitter drama of immigrant homelessness, something we North Americans tend to sugarcoat in our pastoral, conflict-free Nativity scenes. Thirteen years ago some of us began a tradition of celebrating Posadas at the U.S.-Mexico Border. Six months ago Alice and Eric and Elaine and I stood at that terrible border fence (*right*) and heard two sets of poignant stories recited side by side: gospel tales of Jesus for whom there was no room at the inn, and the testimonies of immigrants who face arrest and deportation today.

This aspect of the biblical tradition is perhaps best summed up in Matthew 25, which asserts that Christ is hidden among those who receive food and shelter when we enact our solidarity with the marginalized. It is why the epistle to the Hebrews solemnly warns the church not to neglect hospitality to strangers—for we never know who we might be entertaining.

## III. <u>Immigrants Are Who We Were</u>

*"A wandering Aramean was my ancestor…" (Deut 26:5)*

The second aspect of biblical consciousness is this: followers of God are to act kindly and justly toward the immigrant because they mirror to us our roots. One of the most repeated warnings throughout Torah is this: "Do *not* mistreat the sojourner and the stranger in your midst, because once you were yourselves sojourners and strangers" (e.g. Ex 22:21; Lev 19:33; Deut 10:19). Our middle class churches too easily forget that our biblical tradition was not born out of privilege and affluence, but out of struggle and poverty. Memory and solidarity are essential to our identity as followers of the undocumented God.

In the U.S. we tend to forget that almost all of us have immigrant roots. Indeed, there are only three categories of us:

1. The original inhabitants of this land, who have suffered a continuing legacy of displacement;

2. Those who were forced to come here by economic and political forces such as slavery;
3. And the rest of us, the majority whose ancestors migrated here—in most cases, without proper documentation. (Mine, by the way, came from Portugal, Mexico, England and Austria.)

To ignore or fear or scapegoat today's immigrant poor is, therefore, to despise the deepest part of our own story. Social psychologists would tell us that such self-contempt is profoundly dysfunctional.

Interestingly, culture wars around immigration are found in biblical history too. There were times in which some Israelites wanted to scapegoat foreigners and exclude them from having rights in the body politic. In Isaiah 56 we read about one such moment, which the prophet directly addresses. In the face of a powerful "nativist" movement among his fellow citizens, Isaiah categorically rejects the politics of ethnocentric nationalism: "Do not let not the foreigner say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people'…" (Is 56:3).

Note the tone of internalized oppression here. The excluded throughout history know all too well the self-hatred that comes with second-class citizenship: black children trying to scrub their skin white, immigrants changing their names, women keeping silent, gays and lesbians staying deep in a destructive closet—all to avoid the contempt of a society that barely tolerates them. But God, writes Isaiah, says *differently*: "I will bring the foreigners to my holy mountain, and their sacrifices will be acceptable. Because my house will be known as a place where all nations pray" (Isaiah 56:7).

More than four centuries later, Jesus of Nazareth embodied Isaiah's vision of divine inclusion and solidarity. Jesus consistently embraced outsiders and those without social status—and it got him into a world of trouble. At the culmination of his struggle with the public authorities in Jerusalem--his dramatic "cleansing" in the temple--Jesus invokes Isaiah's oracle welcoming the foreigner: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (Luke 19:46). The record indicates that it was this "action" in the Temple that sealed Jesus' fate. In other words, he bet his life on prophetic hospitality.

Because God's house is *all* about sanctuary.

## IV. Sanctuary as Discipleship

*Contribute to the needs of the saints; practice hospitality. (Rom 12:13)*

What have we learned from this very brief sketch of biblical consciousness concerning the immigrant?

- The God of the Bible is a stranger among us.
- Sojourners are to be especially cared for by God's people.
- Those of us who are settled in the land must never forget our immigrant roots.

In light of this it seems to me therefore that the only question facing people of faith is: *On what basis can we justify not offering sanctuary to those seeking it in our midst?* Or as the book of James puts it rather more sharply, "If a brother or sister is in need and you say to them, 'Go in peace' and do not meet their needs, what is the good of that?" (Jas 2:15f).

I close by returning to the story with which I opened. Its epilogue offers a reality check: there is a cost to being hospitable. The neighbors of the old *campesino* who offered the Levite hospitality in Gibeah were furious that he would bring home an "outsider." They attacked his household, and ended up raping and killing one his guests (Judges 19:22ff). This was a terrible violation of the universal custom of hospitality to the stranger in the Ancient Near East. In grim protest, the husband of the murdered woman cut up her corpse into twelve pieces and sent one to each of the tribes of Israel as a warning: "Consider this, take counsel, and speak out!" (19:30).

As was the case with the Sanctuary movement in the 1980s, exercising a kind of hospitality that runs against the grain of both popular sentiment and government policy can be costly. We need to be realistic about the current political climate, because it affects our congregations. But wouldn't it be better if our congregations were instead able to affect the political climate by exercising moral imagination? That is, after all, the legacy of Cesar Chavez and Martin King and so many others who took unpopular stances and changed the nation.

It is my hope that God's Word might encourage us and challenge our communities of faith to receive the gift of visitation by offering the gift of Sanctuary. For even now our undocumented God stands at our doors knocking, awaiting us to remember our roots and to recover the discipleship of hospitality.

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