

WORLD REFUGEE DAY SERMON – 21 JUNE 2026

Almighty God, may my words today be what you would have me say on behalf of the people you have led me to serve. Amen.

Please be seated.

Good morning. My name is Ann Barnes. Yesterday, June 20, was World Refugee Day. Over fifty years ago the United Nations designated June 20 as the date each year to honor the strength and courage of people forced to flee their home country to escape conflict, war, or persecution. I speak to you today as a member of the Christ Church Interfaith Refugee Ministry.

But before I talk about refugees, I want to reflect on a coincidence in the timing of today's Old Testament reading from Genesis, and World Refugee Day.

We all recognize the names of Abraham, his wife Sarah and their son Issac, and we kind of know their stories. What we rarely focus on, though, are the stories of Abraham, his slave woman Hagar and the son Hagar and Abraham had - Ishmael – Abraham's oldest son, born before Issac.

Today's lesson begins with Sarah's jealousy of Hagar and Ishmael and Sarah's demand that Abraham "cast out" Hagar and Ishmael, which meant to send them out into the desert, alone. Which everyone involved knew meant they would probably die.

Now an important part of the backstory to today's reading is that for years and years, Sarah wasn't able to have children, and it was Sarah who told Abraham to have sex with their slave Hagar, so maybe Abraham would have children that way. But that was then, and now that Sarah has a son – Issac - she is jealous and wants Hagar and Ishmael gone – cast out into the desert, probably to die.

We're told that even though Abraham is upset about this, he forces Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert anyway because – we're told - God tells Abraham “do not be distressed”. God tells Abraham that he – God – will not only make a great nation out of Issac, Abraham's second son, the son that Christians and Jews focus on, but that he – God - will also make a great nation out of Ismael, Abraham's oldest son.

And that is what happens, for out of Ishmael's lineage comes the religion of Islam, the religion of Muslims. The religion of the Afghan refugees whom we serve through the interfaith refugee ministry.

Which brings me back to talking about refugees.

It's hard to be a refugee. There is nothing new about that.

To be faced with such violence or persecution that you decide you have no choice but to take the extreme step of leaving your home, your country, your language, your way of life, your work and the means by which you support yourself and your family, to leave behind people you love...this is a horrible, terrible, desperate situation to be in. Both in what must be left behind and in what must be faced in a new country where you desperately hope to find safety, and to build a new life for yourself and your family.

This was true for Mary and Joseph some 2,000 years ago when they fled from Bethlehem as refugees into Egypt because the jealous – there's that

jealousy thing again – the jealous and powerful King Herrod was threatened by the baby Jesus and wanted Jesus found and murdered.

The same hardships and threats and terror that were true for refugees centuries before Jesus's time, and for Jesus, Mary and Joseph, continue to be true for refugees now, in our time.

But what is also true is that there are good people *everywhere*.

Everywhere there are people with the compassion, the courage, the moral conviction to help. *Everywhere* there are people who answer God's call – whether or not they perceive it as a call from God– people who answer God's call to feed his sheep, to tend his lambs, to welcome and care for the stranger, to love their neighbor.

One of those “*everywhere's*” is right here, in this place, in this congregation, in YOU. What began some four and a half years ago as one congregation – that's us – saying *yes, God*, we can help a refugee family from Afghanistan, has become an interfaith group of volunteers from some 16 different Christian and Jewish congregations working together to help the 12 Afghan refugee families with whom we now have continuing relationships, plus other refugees who we help temporarily or sometimes even just once.

Let's stop for a moment to think about that.

At a time in our world where Christians and Jews and Muslims are actively persecuting and killing each other, including here in the United States, we – this group of Christians and Jews – are working together to help Muslim refugees. This is what is possible when we answer God's call to care for his people who are in need. God's people. No exceptions listed.

Our job in the Interfaith Refugee Ministry is to help the refugees we serve adjust to life here in America and to be able to stand back up on

their own again. And the good news – the really great news – is that they are! Slowly, and sometimes with serious setbacks, sometimes with tough love, each family is steadily making progress.

- By the end of August, we'll be helping just one family pay their rent and utilities – which means that eleven of these 12 refugee families will be standing on their own, able to pay their on-going, regular bills.
- In eleven of our families, every adult who can work is working, and though most are still the working poor, several have been able to progress to better, more stable jobs, with better pay and more hours of work.
- Our Maryland public schools, in four counties and in Baltimore City, have embraced, welcomed, and given outstanding help to refugee children as young as age three and as old as 20.
- Everyone's English language is better and better – for many, thanks directly to the volunteer tutors and “talk buddies” who help them week after week.

All of this, and much, much more, has been made possible not only by the hard work of the refugees themselves, but also by good people – people like you - who say “I can help, what can I do?”.

Here are just some examples of the kinds of things refugee ministry volunteers – including many of you - are doing:

- Giving rides to jobs, medical and dental appointments, grocery stores, soccer practice and games, food banks and pantries, school meetings, community college classes
- Helping troubleshoot issues with food stamps, Medicaid, cash assistance, and with renewals of those critical benefits. Helping complete endless forms and electronic paperwork.

- Teaching computer literacy, setting up usernames and passwords, learning about email, uploading documents, handling electronic files, registering for portals, paying bills on line
- Helping people, some who know as many as five other languages, also learn English
- Interfacing with teachers, learning specialists, social workers from preschool to community college
- Going with family members to important, often difficult, medical and dental appointments
- Helping cover the cost of rent, utilities, community college tuition and fees, unexpected bills and unexpectedly high bills, unanticipated car expenses
- Help with finding jobs and less expensive places to live
- Donating food, personal items, household supplies, used furniture, kitchen supplies, sometimes even cars
- Entertaining little children when a parent is in class or at a doctor's appointment or an important meeting
- Arranging for legal assistance and advice
- Taking children to the library, playgrounds, museums, school events, swimming, the movies, gymnastics, soccer
- Giving driving lessons
- Giving grocery store gift cards to help families adjust to losing food stamps – not because a family isn't still poor or isn't working and paying taxes, but because we as a country have decided that only U.S. citizens and the non-citizens who have "permanent resident" status should have food assistance – fully knowing thousands of people legally here would lose food stamps because of this.
- Helping figure out medical, dental, and prescription drug coverage for families who will lose Medicaid eligibility starting October 1st – again not because a family isn't still poor or isn't working and paying taxes, but because we as a country have decided that only

U.S. citizens and the non-citizens who have “permanent resident” status should have healthcare assistance – fully knowing that thousands of people legally here will lose health coverages because of this.

- Helping families know what to do, and who to call, if they have any interaction of any kind with ICE or the U.S. Border Patrol or are detained for any reason – even though they are here legally.
- Helping parents understand the importance of “standby guardianship agreements”, in case both parents are separated from their under age children, and someone else must have the legal authority to make decisions for and care for the children
- Giving money to help the ministry make possible the many things we do that can’t be paid for in volunteer hours and for which money is needed
- Weeping with the families who are still separated from a husband, a wife, children, their mother or father, brothers and sisters. The separations are heart-rending, and under current federal government policies, reunification is nowhere in sight.

As you can see, being a refugee, and being a helper of refugees involves many really positive things and often really hard, difficult things.

But God does not call us into work that is always easy or straightforward or “one and done”. God calls us to where we are needed, and where we are able to help, even when we think we cannot. Where we get to stand beside and work with good people trying to live into making our world - God’s world - a better place – and isn’t that what we as Christians are supposed to be doing?

Our Jewish colleagues tell us of an important tenet of Judaism – Tikkun Olum – which means to repair the world.

If the work of the interfaith refugee ministry speaks to you, if you feel called to help repair the world in this way, there's a place for you in the Christ Church Interfaith Refugee Ministry.

In closing, I'd like to offer a prayer for refugees. Please stand as you are able.

The Lord be with you.

Almighty God, Adonai, Allah, by all the names we call You, the One God we all worship,

From the dawn of time, your children have known the threat of death, the terror of flight, the pain of exile.

Today we know that so many – thousands upon thousands -

Flee for their own lives and for their children.

The numbers seem so vast, the problem so great -

It is easy to feel helpless. It is easy to forget. It is easy to ignore.

Shake us from complacency and from resignation.

Fill our hearts and minds with understanding and compassion for your children who are forced by persecution and fear to flee their homes.

Remind us that each number is a name, each statistic a person -

Your child, ***your*** beloved.

Strengthen our resolve. Stir in us a spirit of agency and action.

For you have blessed each of us with gifts - gifts to be shared in love for all whom you have created,

Gifts that may be used to welcome, to comfort, to befriend.

Grant that we would listen for Your call to do this work, for Your people.

In all Your Holy Names, this we pray.

Amen.