

## 2009 Global Mission Lenten Series

### Reflection

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#### **Deuteronomy 10:12-13, 17-23**

*So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. For the LORD your God is God of gods and LORD of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the LORD your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen.*

“Es mi primera vez cruzando...” “It’s my first time trying to cross,” was young Marcos’ nervous reply to my question. “But I have no other options. My family can’t live on what we make trying to farm the rocky hillside land. My kids don’t have shoes. I can’t keep enough food on the table and still pay what it costs for them to go to school. I’m afraid of what lies ahead, but I have no other choice. I just have no other choice.”

A shadow of anxiety and something like a weary sadness passed quickly across Marcos’ face before he introduced me to the three other young men with whom he would be traveling, all from the same poor village in the southern state of Chiapas. The four compadres each sported a red baseball cap, hoping that, should they get separated in the desert crossing, the caps would somehow make them more identifiable to one another from afar.

“Esto me pasó en la fábrica...” “This happened in the factory where I was working in Kansas,” said José Luis, pointing to the long, jagged, lumpy scar that covered his entire forearm and part of his hand. “I was working in a factory that makes dog food, using the machine that seals the bags after they’ve been filled. The machine malfunctioned. My arm got caught and the machine didn’t shut down. My friends told me I needed stitches, but I don’t have papers. I was afraid the people at the hospital would send me to jail and then back to Mexico if they found out. Half my village was surviving off the money I was sending home, so I didn’t go to the emergency room. But the cut got infected all the way to the bone. I came back and I had to have many surgeries in order to save my hand. Now I’m going to try and cross again in order to make enough money to pay off the debt we incurred from the surgeries.”

“Ella será la primera,” Jorge said proudly. “My daughter was the first one in our family to finish middle school. She was also the first to go to high school, and she just passed her exams to begin university. Can you imagine? My daughter, in university! She wants to be an engineer. Her mother and I only finished fourth grade, and life has been very hard for us. We have committed ourselves to doing whatever it takes to make sure she can study as long as she wants. I’m a campesino – a peasant farmer. I can’t make enough in Mexico to help her keep studying, but

they say there are jobs in fields in California. If God desires it, I know I'll make it across. If God is with me, I'll find a job.”

I wear a couple of hats in Mexico, but one of the most fulfilling for me is my role serving as country coordinator for the year-long Young Adults in Global Mission volunteer program in Mexico. YAGM volunteers serve through the ELCA in about 9 countries worldwide. In México, they're all placed in the city of Cuernavaca, about an hour and a half south of Mexico City. Since they enter México on tourist visas which need to be renewed after six months, I take the volunteers to the border every year in February in order to renew their paperwork. We also use that time to engage in an intensive immersion experience in the border reality.

Though the border region between the U.S. and México is not our typical context for work, when the volunteers arrive to the border they already have a good sense of the issues present there. The volunteers work in very marginalized communities in and around Cuernavaca. Among the people with whom they work, it is rare to find a single family who does not have at least one loved one either on his way or already working in the United States.

During our border immersion, the volunteers and I spend a full day with a local friend of mine in a little town called Altar (pronounced, in Spanish, as “all-TAR”). Altar is one of the last stops on the migrant trail for many of the 4 to 6 hundred thousand people who attempt to cross into the U.S. each year. The town's entire economy is built around this migrant reality. Upon stepping into the center plaza early in the morning, one finds oneself surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of people, carrying nothing more than small backpacks, waiting for the right coyote's van to show up to drive them to the linea – the line in the desert that separates Mexico from the U.S. The plaza itself is encircled by stands selling gallon-sized water bottles, tennis shoes, baseball caps, socks, backpacks, and the gel energy packets often used by distance runners. It's here where I met Marcos, José Luis, and Jorge, and it's appropriate that the town is named Altar – altar – for it most certainly is a place of sacrifice.

The stories of these men are just three in a sea of stories I have been privileged to hear these past few Februarys. It's amazing to me what people will share with you when your only job is to sit for hours and listen with genuine compassion. Stories of struggles to provide for one's family in a country where the minimum wage is less than \$5 US per day, and where more than 60% of economically active people are not even guaranteed that wage, but are trying to eke out an existence in the informal economy. Stories of children who take to the streets after school not to play soccer, but to work late into the night selling candy or flowers to tourists. Stories of hope that it might be possible to replace the dirt floor of the family's one-room house with a cement one. Stories of dreams that one's children will have the chance to finish middle school and not have to work 12-15 hour shifts in the fields or factories. Simple dreams, but simply out of reach for the more than 70% of Mexican people who are living in poverty. And so, like Marcos, like José Luis, like Jorge, many feel that no other options remain but to make the excruciatingly difficult decision to head north.

Immigration is a deeply complex issue. The problems that make for this yearly displacement of 4-6 hundred thousand people are too numerous, too complicated, and too painful to lay out in detail here. Essentially, though, the mass immigration we see between the U.S. and Mexico is the

result of flawed economic and political policies on both sides of the border. People like Marcos, José Luis, Jorge, and their families are victims in a system that has left them no other choice but to seek a means of survival a world away from their families, their loved ones, and the land that has nurtured them for generations. That's why I believe that we, as people of faith called by bible verse after bible verse to welcome the alien and the stranger in our midst, need to begin looking for ways to shift the immigration conversation in this country. Rather than scapegoating the most vulnerable victims in this messed up system, we need to shift our attention toward the policies on both sides of the border that are making it impossible for people to survive in their own homeland.

In order to begin shifting that conversation, though, many of us first need a bit more information. It is justifiably difficult for folks on the U.S. side of the border to understand, for example, why so many poor Spanish-speaking people enter into this country every year without the appropriate documentation. What most U.S. citizens don't know, however, is that it is nearly impossible for poor Mexicans and Central Americans to be granted a legal means of entering the United States. The process in and of itself is very expensive. Hundreds of dollars worth of fees are involved in applying for a legal visa, and that doesn't take into account the substantial cost of traveling back and forth from one's home, which could be anywhere in Mexico, to the Embassy in Mexico City. Once at the Embassy, applicants must submit to U.S. government officials birth certificates, three months worth of bank statements or payment stubs, proof of property or land ownership, and a series of other documents proving financial viability. But the basic fact is that the vast majority of undocumented immigrants crossing into the United States each year do so out of pure economic need. They cannot produce any of this "proof" of economic viability, so they head north without legal papers.

The poverty, brokenness, and suffering that have led to this annual mass exodus out of Mexico and Central America and into the United States are, I believe, worthy of our most anguished psalms of lament. I see that poverty and brokenness everywhere I turn in Mexico. And yet, in one of the great paradoxes that defines our faith, it is also in this brokenness and suffering that God's presence is made intimately known within and among the people who suffer most in Mexico. The depth of faith and strength of spirit of the Mexican people humbles me. They truly are a resurrection people, and in the midst of all the suffering, I see glimpses of God's resurrection promise breaking in all over the place. I see it in the vibrant colored flowers that pour out of rusted cans next to the doors of the shacks that make up the squatter settlement of La Estación. I see it in the tiny body of 8-year-old Liliana who, with all the might and power of the widow confronting the unjust judge in the gospel of Luke, shakes her finger and shouts at a waiter who won't let her into his patio restaurant in order to sell her wares. I see it in the face of Felipa, an indigenous, Nahuatl-speaking woman, as she forms clay that she has dug from her family's corn patch into a rustic bowl as a gift to the young adult volunteer who has shared in her struggles through one too-short year. And I see it the shining eyes of María, dressed in her very best and standing next to seven well-scrubbed children – four of them her own and three of them half-brothers whom she is also raising, as they stand in wait for the husband and father who is making his return after an arduously difficult year in a half in the United States.

At the end of this Lenten season we hear a call from the God of history – a God who is steadfast in working justice for the orphan and the widow; a God who loves the stranger, providing him

food and clothing; and a God who calls us to love that stranger as well, for we were once strangers in the land of Egypt. In this season, tens of thousands of strangers will struggle toward hope in a land far from home. They are parents and spouses, brothers and friends, seeking to provide for the basic needs of the ones they love. Teach us to be faithful in our response to these strangers, O God. Guide our feet. Amen.