

*God bless the reading, the hearing, the singing, and the preaching of the Word today. Amen.*

Let me tell you a story.

One hundred and one years ago, a political revolution took place that ousted the ruling family of the country where some of my family was living. With the abdication of the Czar and the rise of the Bolsheviks, any Russian citizen who had supported the Czar was at risk. Most who weren't killed made an effort to flee for their lives.

One hundred years ago, a civil war started in Russia, that ended with a victory for the extremists who would run the country for the next many decades. The moderate voices who had tried to be involved with the new government had been silenced.

Any Russian refugees quickly figured out that they could not return to their homeland, probably for a long time.

These Russian refugees settled in various places in Europe, but many of them – including my grandfather, his sister, and his mother – settled in the south of France. The Russian aristocracy had already been speaking French for a number of years – as you may know, there was lots of intermarriage between the powerful families in Europe, across country lines. So, France seemed like a natural choice for many Russian expatriates.

The leaders of these countries had choices every step along the way. As Jeremiah reminds us, the leaders could have destroyed and scattered the people. If they had done so, they would have called down God's judgment against them!

Woe to you shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord, the God of Israel. It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.

(Jeremiah 23:1-3, edited)

But some the leaders in this story at least tried to make good choices, I think, if you assume the best of them.

Czar Nicholas hadn't been a particularly good ruler when he was in charge of Russia. Many things about the social structure were unjust, and kept the poor people in a state of serfdom – unable to earn enough to buy the land on which they lived – while elevating the aristocracy.

But at the end, when he realized that the people were rising up against him en masse, the Czar decided to abdicate rather than fight the inevitable. He saw that his people would be more united if they could create their own government. So he stepped out of their way.

The leaders in France after the First World War must have been dealing with refugees from many countries. But they also made room for refugees from Russia, even while they were rebuilding their own society after the War to End All Wars. They allowed Russian refugees to build a boarding school so that their children could learn about Russian culture while they were living in exile – that’s where my grandfather was raised. In addition to Russian history, language, and literature, he told me he learned important life skills like ballroom dancing. I guess if the aristocracy had been restored, he would have needed to know this!

Today’s reading from the Hebrew Bible tells us that a good leader will guide the people without fear, and none of them will get lost or go missing. Families will stay together. The people will be united.

Only ungodly leaders cause separation and division among God’s people.

This message is affirmed by the words of Paul to the church in Ephesus:

For [Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has created one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and reconciles both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

(Ephesians 2:14-16, edited)

Jesus has broken down the dividing wall between us and whoever it is that we see as “the other.” There is no more hostility. All of God’s people are united into a single humanity.

We’re not identical – there are still Jews and Gentiles – but there is no need to let those differences get in the way of us creating a community together to worship God and love one another.

OK, let me tell you another story.

One hundred and one years ago, about a month before the US entered World War One, Congress granted citizenship to all residents of Puerto Rico, which had been a US territory for just over 20 years. This meant that when the draft for WWI came up, my great-grandfather had to register. Two years later, when my grandmother was born, she was born a US citizen.

Fast forward a couple of decades, skip over another World War, and as Europe was trying to recover from the effects of such a devastating conflict, some folks chose to seek a new homeland again.

My grandfather found his way to Puerto Rico. He met my grandmother, apparently wowed her with those ballroom dancing skills, and they fell in love.

And then his visa ran out. With no legal way to remain in this country, my grandfather island-hopped over to Haiti. My grandmother joined him there, they were married, and he was legally able to return to the US. It was as simple as that.

The relevant political leaders in this story were American. They expanded citizenship to a group of outsiders, which was ultimately a good choice, even if it was done with mixed motivations. 20,000 Puerto Ricans ended up serving in WWI, helping bring the American military to success.

After WWII, circumstances were different, but there was still a path to citizenship for my grandfather. He wasn't sent back to his country of origin – which no longer existed, anyway – but he was able to become a US citizen and build a family in this country along with my grandmother.

Do you know your family's migration story? As I'm sure you've figured out my now, I think they are fascinating. Even most Native Americans have migration stories, as the colonizers pushed them out of their lands and into territory belonging to different tribes, and eventually onto reservations.

What act of Congress or law or legal right made your family eligible to become US citizens? Or, if you're not a US citizen, what would it take for you to become one? I can tell you that marrying an American doesn't serve as a shoo-in for citizenship today in the same way that it did for my grandfather.

Whatever your family story, the Bible is clear about the role of leaders in times of international crisis:

Families belong together.

Faithful leaders gather people together, calm their fears, and create justice in society for all people.

God brings peace to the whole world.

And we – God's followers, everyday people – can help establish peace when we smash down the walls that divide us and recognize that God made all people into a single humanity.

We are one. We are no better or worse than people of a different ethnicity or nationality, a different skin color or religious belief.

If God can break down the barriers between Jews and Gentiles, then God can certainly break down the barriers between Black and white, immigrant and native-born, male and female, slave and free, and yes, even Republican and Democrat! And so we need to figure out ways to work around those dividing lines between us and our neighbor, to create peace.

God will cause a new branch to grow on Jesse's family tree – that family of God's people who fell into disgrace almost as soon as they ascended to power – God will give them a chance to redeem their family legacy and finally create a just and righteous and life-giving society for all people! By sending Jesus to the city of David, as a humble servant with power to do miracles, God added new growth to the community of God's followers.

Jesus gives us an example to follow. He gives us hope that truly, righteous leaders will appear who will have primary concern for people over profits, and who will work to support families and immigrants and people just like you and me who find themselves looking for help.

When Jesus saw crowds of people in need, he had compassion for them. And he served them. He healed them. He restored them to community. He gave them another chance at life.

This is what a good leader – a good shepherd – does for the people, or the sheep. A leader doesn't separate or alienate others. A righteous leader ensures that all people have their basic needs met.

God promises to call to task all leaders who mistreat the children of God. But even more importantly, God promises to bring about peace.

This time of division and separation won't last forever. Someday, families who belong together will be able to be together – and hopefully that day comes soon! And until that day arrives, we can do what Jesus would do, and work to bring about justice and reconciliation and – most important – unity among humanity.

For there is no longer anyone who is a stranger or alien, but all are citizens and members of the household of God.

(Ephesians 2:19)

May the God who promises unity bless us and help us to join in the work of reconciliation. Amen.