

The God of liberation and freedom is our God.

I can't help but feel we are in a different place than two years ago.

The promise is, wherever people in need are, God is present. In our text for today/tonight, the people of God stood on the threshold of the land God had promised for them. And God was right there with them.

Today we stand on the threshold in a time of transition. We are on the line that separates life that was pre-pandemic and life that is post-pandemic. You are here. We are here. God is here with all and for all.

Just a few weeks ago several men, refugees from Afghanistan, arrived in the Chippewa Valley invited here by a host of welcoming, caring people of faith. An interfaith group, Welcoming New Neighbors, quickly organized this year and is partnering with Lutheran Social Services' Refugee Resettlement program to assist these men to resettle in the United States. These men stand on the threshold of a new life. They have stood on other thresholds recently, including one that brought them out of danger in their homeland, then another threshold of being temporarily housed at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst in New Jersey, to standing on the ground in Eau Claire. Their journey continues as they await permanent housing, education, and jobs.

The story in scripture today is about a threshold in the journey of God's people. Long ago the family of Jacob and sons fled to Egypt during a famine. They stayed in Egypt for 400 years, and slowly overtime they fell from being welcomed and honored to being the lowest of people, living as slaves in Egypt. God heard their cries and rescued them and brought them out of Egypt and temporarily settled them in a dry and desert region. They journeyed in this region and faced hardships that, at times, made them wonder if life was better when they were still enslaved. God used this time in the desert region to instruct and shape the people to trust in him and look to him for life.

They stand at the boundary ready to enter the land God had promised them. This land would be a place they would practice living by what they were taught. But as soon as they enter they would find this was just another step along the way. They would have new thresholds ahead of them. They will learn again and again that their identity is to be a people of the way, of the way of provision from God for all their daily needs that will lead them to thankfulness. And they will notice this is the way of mercy and compassion, first that they receive from God, and then one they realize can be shared with their neighbor.

Many people at St. John's felt close to the Afghan refugees when 13,000 of them arrived at Fort McCoy in the state of Wisconsin. They became a part of our prayer petitions. We offered assistance by providing quilts and other needed clothing. True to our servant hearts we wanted to respond quickly and we did. We joined the efforts of others in the area in the late summer to provide what was needed.

Part of being close to a neighbor is to learn what you can about what they experience in life. For today's global refugees seeking a place of safety like the land God promised to the early Israelites is still difficult. The Israelites spent forty years in the dry desert region after fleeing Egypt. Modern refugees spend years, even a decade or more, in a foreign city or refugee camp before they can be resettled permanently. The process for resettling in the United State requires twelve screening checks, the involvement of the United Nations, and several governmental departments, from the FBI to Homeland Security. Further requirements are imposed after refugees arrive in the country: they must repay their cost of travel to the US, beginning six months after their arrival. And within a year, they must apply for permanent residency.

As these deadlines loom, refugees are forced to adapt rapidly to life in their new country. In February here in the Chippewa Valley the Welcoming New Neighbors group called for a whole list of needed goods needed to furnish apartments for the ten Afghan refugees that arrived in the area. Classes to learn English began for the men. Jobs and transportation and housing are all being sought. Meanwhile the culture shock is immense. People are trying to provide meals that are culturally appropriate. There is outreach to a faith community that is their faith. American retail stores can be overwhelming. All of life has an unsettled feel while the refugee is going through the steps to resettle. And all the while they stand at the threshold of a new life that is slowly taking shape. What has been left behind? What lies ahead? What has been clear is that people of faith have stepped onto the threshold with them, acting as the presence of one like God, who is with them and for them.

Moses and the people of God stood on the threshold of a new leg in their journey with God. Ten Afghan refugees stand upon the threshold of a new life in the Chippewa Valley. We stand on the threshold of a new time and day as we progress to a new stage of life defined by the pandemic. This may not be our first threshold, and it won't be our last. But as we journey, help us to notice where God is at with us, where God is leading, and what God is providing.