

## Borders and Blessings: Reflections on the National Immigration Crisis from the Arizona Desert

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Dick Armey, retired member of Congress, conservative Christian, and Tea Party activist, may have our answer. In a public conversation with Representative Tom Tancredo, who favors closing our doors to Mexican immigrants, Armey reminds us that this country has always held its doors open: “America’s not a nation that builds walls.”<sup>1</sup> We don’t build up walls in the United States. We tear them down.

Bishop Kirk Smith serves the Episcopal Diocese of Arizona, the state which includes the Tucson Sector, the heaviest drug and human trafficking south-to-north corridor in the United States. He regularly reminds his clergy and laity that the current immigration crisis we face is the civil rights struggle of this generation. For the past three years, he, along with Arizonan Episcopalians and others, has traveled to the sleepy Mexican pueblo of Naco, Sonora, for the annual “God Has No Borders” Naco Border Procession. Together with the bishop at the U.S.-Mexico border, we have listened as he has reminded all of us that “God hates walls,” that “God tears down walls,” that the wall between Mexico and the United States will one day be a part of the “ash heap of history” where remnants of other walls, Jericho’s and Berlin’s among them, gather dust and return to the soil.<sup>2</sup>

Members of the Diocese of Arizona, along with other people of faith and local residents, recently held the 2010 Border Procession. This particular procession, the fifth annual, was exceptional. The event was a beautiful, binational celebration of people and culture. Those of us from the United States crossed into Mexico into a colorful array of music, welcome, and the green, white, and red of the Mexican flag.

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Stein, “Armey: Tom Tancredo Is A ‘Destructive’ Force On The GOP,” *The Huffington Post*, March 15, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Kirk Smith, 2009 Naco Border Procession message, Naco, Sonora, Mexico, April 18, 2009.

The entire community of Naco bid us welcome. We were called friends and neighbors and reminded that “God has no borders.” We processed along the main street of Naco to sirens, praise music, and folkloric dance. The political persuasion of the U.S. participants in this event was diverse; their religious affiliation, in some cases, nonexistent. But unity was tangible and friendship real. The irony of the moment did not escape us. Many of the people of Naco knew that the state of Arizona had enacted only the day before a severe law created out of the fear of scarcity.<sup>3</sup> Mexico’s response, in contrast, extended to us a festive hospitality and a gracious and abundant welcome.

Our nation, as everyone recognizes—even those opposed to immigration reform—is a nation of immigrants. Only the flora and fauna are indigenous to North America. Whether we arrived via the Bering Strait, Boston, or the U.S.-Mexico border, whether we came four hundred years ago or four days ago, we all began our journey elsewhere. We forget that at our peril. Throughout the history of the United States, several successive migration waves have contributed to our common life, helping to fashion us as a diverse, flexible, and tolerant society. Unquestionably, immigrants have experienced exploitation and abuses at the hands of those who preceded their arrival, and they in turn have acted out nativist impulses against others who followed them. But as a whole, immigrants have long been appreciated as contributing to the marvel of what this country has become: one from many. Acknowledging the debt we owe to our immigrant heritage is essential as we face the challenges the current immigration wave of Latino migrants present us.

The vast majority of immigrants who look to the United States for a new home look north from the south, and the vast majority from Mexico. These immigrants flee not the destruction and ravages of war, but the slower decay and death of poverty. They look north for economic opportunity: most of them come here simply to have a better life, to work, to help family members still in the south, to give their children food and education and health care.

The immigration policy of our government does not welcome Latino migrants. The United States does not issue an adequate number of work visas, particularly for those who have few or no marketable skills. Those fortunate enough to acquire guest worker status often earn just enough to cover travel and living costs in the United States

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<sup>3</sup> “Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act,” Arizona Senate Bill 1070, signed into law by Governor Jan Brewer on April 23, 2010.

and can only save or send home modest remittances. Consequently, Latino immigrants come by the thousands and hundreds of thousands into the U.S. without benefit of legal status and documentation. They cross into the country illegally because they have little or no other choice. To stay in their own countries means continued poverty, lack of necessities, and decline. To venture to the north, toward opportunity, education, and economic well-being, despite the risks to their lives and the harsh separation from those they love, means life and hope.

The core values of our faith have always favored life and prosperity. God promised Abraham he would father a great nation with descendants too numerous to count. Jesus shared with his followers and other hearers that he came to give them life abundant. Our tradition has always asked us to remember the poor and share the good life with others from our own abundance. It also insists that we remember those who, because of widowhood or status as orphans or identity as strangers, do not have the ability to share in the abundance around them. Through its Levitical code, Israel asked itself to remember the strangers among them. Once they possessed Canaan, they were not to forget the burdens they bore as they made Pharaoh's bricks, not to forget what it was to be a stranger in a strange land. To do so was to risk forgetting who they were as God's people.

So much emphasis in our church conversations has centered on sexuality and debates around appropriate sexual conduct. Many reference two single Levitical injunctions against what is perceived as aberrant sexual behavior (Lev. 18:22, 20:13). Little attention, in comparison, is given to the same Levitical code which urges Israel to remember the stranger, to care for the alien, and to welcome the sojourner (Lev. 19:10, 33–34; 23:22). Such a contrast in emphasis prompts the question, "Why was it so important to Israel to establish this ethic and to insist upon supporting the stranger?"

Israel reminded itself to welcome and care for the stranger precisely because it did not experience such embrace and generosity in Egypt. Israel was to remember by welcoming; to remember by never forgetting its past and God's powerful work in delivering its people out of that suffering. Doing so strengthened God's chosen and encouraged them to be the people of God they knew themselves to be and to build the society worthy of that identity.

We in the United States would do well to open our doors more widely. The faith that many possess here and the morality that anchors it require us to prevent deaths in the desert, to reunite families, and to offer people a living wage. The parable of the sheep and the goats

in Matthew 25 is only one example of passages in Scripture that support our efforts to care for the stranger among us. Our values require nothing less from us.

National self-interest, however, also compels us to open our doors. Though not at the heart of our faith system nor particularly emphasized by the One we follow as Lord, self-interest needs to be appreciated and well-articulated if we are to speak with any relevance to other citizens of our country who play a crucial role in bringing about immigration reform.

Many people on this planet covet and envy our abundance and look at our democratic and economic success as something to be emulated. The United States boasts one of the largest middle classes in history and enjoys a political system that is relatively responsive to the wishes of those it governs—the recent immigration law in Arizona being an unfortunate and sad proof of such political agility. Many of us here earn a decent living, have quality health care and enough food to eat, and are able to educate our children well. Other people see our wealth and go to great extremes to share in our prosperity.

The practice of including others into our society, economy, and civic institutions explains, in part, our good fortune. Even though longstanding racial tensions and economic disparities befuddle and weaken us, the United States continues to be a tolerant society. Our abundance includes a free press, a relatively transparent system of government, civilian control of our military, and an economic system capable of great flexibility and the creation of immense wealth.

An embrace of immigrants, of those looking to do better for themselves and their families, helps to explain this public good. Whether they were Puritans escaping religious intolerance, Irish fleeing famine, or Jews and others rejecting Nazism, people have come here seeking to leave tyranny, however manifest, behind. In abandoning the limitations of their home country, immigrants have found opportunity leading to the creation of wealth. Europeans from southern and eastern Europe, for example, contributed their labor to the country's industrialization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And as they worked, they participated in and created our civic institutions, faith communities, and governments. Many problems abound for us today, such as how to continue to cultivate the kind of cultural miscegenation that contributes to a creative and open society, but our nation's strength derives from its immigrant foundation.

We are stronger as a people each time a new resident succeeds in education, business, and family life. When we succumb to the fear of

scarcity, relationships are perceived as a burden rather than a gift. New opportunities can be obscured or missed because of the perception that there is or will not be enough. Growth and welcome and inclusion are hard work and lead to unforeseen and heavy challenges. The integration of culture and language often unearths differing historical perspectives and our understandings and theologies, once dominant and privileged, sometimes resist leveling and competition. To resist this essential grafting process, however, can produce even greater difficulty and danger: stagnation, closed-mindedness, and insularity.

Opponents of immigration reform point out that to “open our borders” will release an inundation of unskilled migrants who will overburden our educational and health care infrastructure to the point of collapse. But the reality here in Arizona and elsewhere is that we already are experiencing an inundation of migrants. Our border is porous. Those who are not apprehended still manage to cross into the United States, but they do not have the benefit of adequate legal protections from unfair practices in the workplace, and they are forced to live on the fringes of society. With reasonable immigration policy in place, migrants could work in the legitimate economy and participate in the assimilation process, which has contributed immeasurable good to our country and could work in our favor once again. Additionally, with reform in place, law enforcement personnel, who are currently heavily burdened by the apprehension, processing, and deportation of economic migrants, could be redirected and their time reallocated toward illegal drug interdiction and the capture and prosecution of real and dangerous criminals. Efforts could also be redoubled to assure that those who threaten terror are unsuccessful at crossing into our country at its southern border.

Without broad reform our situation will worsen, and more states, out of a growing sense of frustration, panic, and anxiety, will pass laws that exacerbate the crisis rather than solve it, as we have seen in Arizona. Senate Bill 1070 mandates that Arizona local police and sheriff departments must enforce federal immigration law, which will only worsen an already tenuous relationship between residents and the police. Undocumented residents, and their friends and families, will no longer report crimes against them, fearing that to do so will subject them to scrutiny of their own immigration status. Effective law enforcement depends on a basic trust between the residents of a community and the officers who protect it. If even a small segment of a community does not report robbery, rape, and other serious crimes, all the inhabitants of that community live in greater danger. Bombs

and violence, though powerful and real, are no match for subtler vehicles of death and destruction: silence, intolerance, and fear of the other.

In his final Deuteronomic discourse, Moses called the Israelites to choose life and blessing, abundance and relationship, as they entered into the promised land (Deuteronomy 30). He urged Israel to move into its future confident in their covenant with God and conscious of their experience as a people called, delivered, saved. Moses reminded his people that their survival depended on their appreciation of what God had done in their history. They could not create their future as a free and prosperous nation without remembering their past as suffering slaves, and God's powerful, concrete, and defining intervention. That memory would serve them as they faced abundance and lack, war and exile, restoration and hope.

As we make way for the stranger among us, as we enact humane and just immigration reform, we are doing this as much unto ourselves as unto others. Immigrants from all countries, but especially those from across our southern border, remind us of what we underappreciate and undervalue. They remind us that there is still milk and honey here in this land of promise. They remind us that if people are supported and allowed to pursue opportunity, to use their imagination, to learn and to work well, good things can and will happen.

Many anecdotes circulate among those of us who live on the U.S.-Mexico border. One such story tells of an immigrant who turned abandoned wooden pallets into a profitable business simply by retrieving them from trash dumps, repairing them, and selling them to new users. An Episcopalian in Arizona tells his story as the son of a woman who left her family in Mexico and crossed into the United States hoping to find work enough to send for her children. When she found that work, she sent for her children, and they all benefited from the 1986 federal legislation that legalized their immigration status. Her children received an excellent education, and they are currently raising their own families. They share their faith with their children, encourage them to care about their neighborhoods, teach them to vote, to pay taxes, to enjoy abundance, and remind them to care for others less fortunate than themselves. As with earlier waves of migration, this current wave has and will continue to contribute good to our society in measurable and concrete ways.

At our best, we do well to make room for others, to welcome, to help people to find a place. The myth of Israel, the myth of the United

States, our own personal family and individual myths—they remind us of what is possible here, and what can be done with creativity and imagination and the support of the law. They remind us of one of the fundamental truths of who we are as a people: that there is promise among us, or, to use a theological term, blessing.

Blessing is what this current wave of Latino migration affords us: the blessing of those who look to this land and see what we are in danger of forgetting—that we in the United States have abundance and great blessing. We witness to the truth that what is held in common by a diverse society is stronger than what threatens to separate it. Social scientists and politicians point to the aging of the Anglo population in the United States, while acknowledging the relative youth of the Latino population. Our economic recovery and long-term interests are well-served by doing the very best we can to train and equip these younger people to lead and create in our economy.

I have seen what I argue for in the larger, national scope of our common life come to fruition on the local level in the bilingual congregation I serve on the border. At our bishop's request, St. Stephen's Church in Douglas, Arizona instituted a Spanish service in 2007. Prior to this date our congregation was primarily Anglo and aging; other than Sunday mornings, it gathered infrequently for community events. With the addition of Spanish worship, as we seek to be one community that worships in two languages, a growing richness is surfacing as members from both services get to know each other and work and minister side by side. Challenges abound, such as the occasional and cumbersome bilingual worship service. Stewardship and giving needs to be strengthened. We do not educate our children as well as we could. But there is a real hope that the addition of our Spanish-speaking members will contribute to the long-term viability of this community of faith.

This current wave of migration will, if embraced, lead to a deeper and renewed sense of who we are as a people and a deeper commitment to our values. At St. Stephen's, differences in languages and culture, typically seen as barriers, are increasingly appreciated as gift and blessing. These newcomers to the Episcopal Church have helped to give me, a lifelong Episcopalian, a renewed confidence and appreciation for the unique identity we possess as Anglicans. A similar dynamic can be true in the church at the national level, and regarding our civic life. Working with politically engaged immigrants renews my confidence in the democratic process. Their growing civic literacy challenges and encourages my own level of participation in public

affairs. Enthusiasm is contagious, and our public life and institutions will grow stronger from those discovering their possibilities.

At St. Stephen's in Douglas, Arizona, a small church in a small town, we have new life because we have opened our doors, hung out our shingle, and welcomed those who once were strangers. Our challenges and resistances exist, but they are no match for blessing and life. God has asked us to remember: to remember that we all were far off once, but now have been brought near; to remember that the dividing walls of hostility between us, whether from the attitudes created by racial difference or culture or the fear that there will not be enough, will not last. Christ is our peace; we have crossed over into a new land of relationship, wonder, and opportunity where there are no walls. God has no borders. You and I are one.