

STRANGER THINGS

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Leviticus 19:33-34

On August 30, of this past year, America ended its longest-running war when the U.S. military pulled out of Afghanistan. This war began just weeks after September 11, 2001, when President George W. Bush announced that American forces had launched attacks against al Qaeda and Taliban targets in Afghanistan. At the time, the Taliban governed most of Afghanistan, and it was believed that al Qaeda had planned the 9/11 attacks from bases inside Afghanistan. The U.S. requested that the Taliban hand over the al Qaeda leaders, but they refused. As President Bush explained, “Now the Taliban will pay a price.” And so began Operation Enduring Freedom.

Within months of the start of Operation Enduring Freedom, Osama bin Laden and other top leaders of al Qaeda had fled to safety in Pakistan. American forces did not pursue them, and Pakistan became a safe haven for al Qaeda and Taliban fighters.

Inside Afghanistan, American troops quickly toppled the Taliban government and crushed its fighting forces. What happened next was the attempt by the U.S. and NATO to rebuild Afghanistan into a western style democracy. At this point, Afghanistan was a desperately poor country already ravaged by the Soviet occupation of the 1980s as well as its own civil war. The U.S. and NATO plan had its early successes with schools and hospitals and public facilities as well as the education of girls. Women were entering the workforce and government. But there was also corruption. Hundreds of millions of dollars earmarked for reconstruction was stolen or misappropriated. The new government had little power beyond the major cities. In 2008, there were 8000 American troops on the ground and the Taliban was rebuilding.

In 2009, President Obama deployed 100,000 troops in what we know as the “surge”. But the Taliban only grew stronger.

In 2011, A U.S. Navy SEAL team killed bin Laden in Pakistan while the war in Afghanistan was at a stalemate. In 2014, President Obama ended major combat operations in Afghanistan and ordered troops to transition to training and assisting Afghan security forces.

Out in the provinces, the Taliban continued to grow in strength and power. Afghan national forces were either unable or unwilling to stop the Taliban. When the U.S. announced the withdrawal of troops in 2021, the Taliban surged. It was believed that it would take months or a year or more for the Taliban to gain control of the country. It happened in weeks. The Taliban advanced on Kabul taking

provincial capital after provincial capital. The president fled the country on August 15. You will recall the images of the thousands of Afghans rushing the Kabul airport desperately seeking to leave the country ahead of the arrival of the Taliban.

So, what is the Taliban? The Taliban was founded in the early 1990s by Afghan guerrilla fighters who had fought the Soviets in the 70s and 80s. These mujahadeen fighters were joined by young men who had been trained in Pakistani schools called madrassas. The word Taliban is Pashtu for the word student and reflects those students who joined at the beginning. The Taliban promises a stabilizing force within a chaotic nation. They ban music and television, they jail men whose beards are too short, and they require women to wear burqas. The Taliban is directed by a pre-Islamic tribal code and fundamentalist interpretation of sharia law. The Taliban ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001.

I'm telling you all of this because the events in Afghanistan became personal to my family when just before Christmas when we met Masooda. It was then that our daughter called home and said, "Mom, dad, we have to help this girl." The girl was Masooda, a 20-year-old Afghan refugee living in Tennessee.

The short version of the story is that it was one of my daughter's high school friends who had gotten to know Masooda and was helping her. This friend and her family we're planning to be away for two weeks during Christmas and asked if Courtney could take over. We said yes.

Masooda is a native of Kabul, Afghanistan. She was studying pharmacy at the University of Kabul when the Taliban arrived. There are many reasons why she needed to leave her country. As a young, single woman, she ran the risk of being forcibly married to one of the Taliban fighters. At 20-years-old, Masooda had never experienced the repressive rule of the Taliban. She certainly knew about them. Her sister's husband had been killed by the Taliban a few years earlier. Masooda had grown up with an education and a dream for her future, a dream would not be obtainable under Taliban rule.

So, when Kabul fell, she rushed to the airport hoping to catch a plane out. She went the first day and was beaten up by some members of the Taliban. She went the second day and waited, but no luck. She went the third day and somehow boarded an American military plane which took her to Qatar. From Qatar, she was taken to Germany. From Germany to Washington, D.C. From D.C. to Camp DC to camp Atterbury in Indiana. There, at this Indiana National Guard facility, she lived for three months in a large room surrounded by other refugees—families and children. It was difficult.

Remember, Masooda is just 20 years old. She is all alone. She left her country with only the clothes on her back, her passport and education documents, \$1200 cash, and, of course, her iPhone. She would like to get to Northern Virginia where she has a cousin who also fled Afghanistan, but a bureaucratic mix-up sent her

instead to Tennessee. In Tennessee, she was placed in an extended stay hotel near the Nashville airport. While her hotel expenses were covered, she had no money for food. My daughter's friend and her family had been taking Masooda to buy food, but they needed us to take over during the holidays. We were happy to comply.

What my wife and daughter and I discovered was an amazing young woman. Masooda is strong, determined, and extremely intelligent. We made sure she had food, my daughter took her shopping for clothes, we brought her to our home to get her out of the extremely depressing hotel. During the big snowstorm in January, Masooda stayed with us. She insisted on cooking Afghan dishes for us which were absolutely delicious. I took her to the dentist to see about caring for an abscessed tooth that had been causing her pain since leaving home.

Under the Trump administration, immigration numbers were sharply scaled back. In response, the various aid agencies downsized their immigration departments. The result is that they were completely unprepared for the onslaught of 75,000 Afghan refugees. Because of the backlog of cases around the country, the system is moving slowly. And this was the case for Masooda. She was stuck in limbo in a drab hotel in Tennessee where she knew no one. I tried contacting her caseworker at Catholic Charities but heard nothing. As it turns out, the caseworker was out with Covid. So, one day after New Year's, I picked up Masooda and we drove to Catholic Charities and knocked on the door. It took a while to get to the right person, but they were extraordinarily kind and helpful in provided us with much needed information about Masooda's situation.

In mid-January, Masooda was able to leave Tennessee and go to Virginia where she is now staying with her cousin. She is happy to be with someone she knows. My wife and I keep in touch with Masooda and will continue to do what we can to help her settle into a new life in this country. It doesn't look likely that she will be able to return to Afghanistan anytime soon. I have been reading all I can about the plight of the Afghan refugees and their stories are heartbreaking. I can tell you that having someone in your home who has lost everything makes you feel blessed for all that you have.

The issue of immigration is always a contentious political topic. Who do we let in? How many do we take in? Who do we turn away? These are questions that many ask. But for people of faith, the only question to ask about immigrants is 'how do I help?' For Jews and Christians, our scriptures are clear. We are to help the stranger in our midst. As we find in the ancient code of Leviticus, *When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.*

The book of Deuteronomy reflects the words of Leviticus when it tells us, *Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt* (Deuteronomy 10:19).

The Bible consistently spells out that it is the responsibility of the citizen to ensure that the immigrant, the stranger, the refugee is respected, welcomed, and cared for, welcomed, and loved. There is always the reminder to us that we too were once strangers. These passages always remind us that we too were once strangers. Unless you are a Native American, it is true of all of us. It was true of the Israelites as well as aliens in Egypt. The story of scripture is one of immigrants and outsiders—Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Ruth, and more, all people on the move.

In the New Testament, Jesus' life begins as a political refugee when the Holy Family is forced to flee to Egypt. And then later in his ministry, Jesus calls us *to love our neighbors as ourselves*. Neighbors are not just the people on our street, the neighbor is everyone, anyone, even the stranger. In the book of Hebrews we read, *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it (13:2)*.

But the final word rests with Jesus himself when he tells how the righteous of this world will be set apart from the cursed based on how they treated him. He says, *I was a stranger, and you welcomed me*. And he says that to those who are righteous. But the accursed, on the other hand, are those who were not welcoming to Jesus. And many, of course, wanted to know when they failed to welcome Jesus, and he tells them, *just as you did to the least of them, you did to me*.

How we treat others, the least of those among us—the stranger, the alien, the refuge, the poor, the homeless, the friendless—how we treat them, Jesus tells us, is how we treat him.

So, why is it that my family is spending all this time and money helping Masooda? There are three reasons. One, she is a delightful young woman and we have enjoyed having her in our home and getting to know her and her life in Afghanistan. She is also the same age as our daughter and our parental instincts have kicked in. We can't stand to see someone in this situation. Two, we can't imagine the horror of her situation—being so young and being ripped out of her home and going to an unknown place. She didn't know if she would end up in the U.S. or some other country. She just got on a plane to get out.

And third, and this is the greatest reason why we help, our faith demands it. The words of our savior Jesus Christ are very clear on what we are to do. From beginning to end the scriptures tell us that we are to help this very person. So, we do. We do it as an expression of our faith, as expression of our love for God in Jesus Christ, and as an expression of our thanksgiving for all that we have for truly we have entertained an angel.

Amen.