

Sermon for the Festival of Christ the King (C), 25.xi.05, 10:00
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle, Bogue, Pennsylvania
Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 46; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43
Holy Eucharist, ELW Setting V

J. J.!

GRACE to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was
and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

**He has rescued us from the power of darkness and
transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved Son, in
Whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.**

-- Colossians 1:13,14

When I lived as a pastor in Germany, I had to apply for a visa to live in the country as long as I was employed in my particular job, “pastoral ministry and care in the Evangelical Lutheran Territorial Church of Hannover,” as it was stamped right in my passport. Periodically, every six months at first, then annually, I had to collect my family’s passports and take them with my own to the

immigration office at city hall where the many nationalities standing in line in the corridors reminded me that my family and I were just a few among thousands asking for permission to continue to live and work in the Federal Republic of Germany. Leaving our U.S. passports with a clerk at city hall always made me a bit nervous, because, during that time, none of us could either leave Germany or return home. The renewed visa was granted each time, but with the understanding that it might not be next time or that it could conceivably be revoked at any time. We were legal guests, in Germany, and our continued status as guests depended on my work and the State's good pleasure.

Part of that ministry brought me into direct contact with those seeking not just work but survival,

refuge from oppressive or crumbling regimes. In that context I became acquainted with the ‘Saint Raphael Society,’ an agency of the Catholic Church tasked with assisting immigrants and those who host them. Through the people of the St. Raphael Society, I learned that, not since the so-called ‘dark ages’ has there been such a great migration of peoples back and forth across the world, east to west, south to north. Economic and political change, warfare and the scarcity of food, dramatic changes in the environment have and are causing men and women to pull up stakes, to leave the land of their birth.

What have the wandering peoples sought in other nations? What are they seeking still? In his State of the Union Address before the 77th Congress at the beginning

of what was to be a fateful year for our nation, in January of 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt summed this up as eloquently as it has ever been said or likely will be. FDR spoke of ‘The Four Freedoms’:

- **Freedom of speech**
- **Freedom of worship**
- **Freedom from want**
- **Freedom from fear**

As President Roosevelt understood them, these four freedoms represented the aspirations of all humanity, aspirations he believed were being realized most fully in the United States of America. In 1941, with Great Britain in danger of falling to Nazi Germany, the last remaining democracy in Western Europe holding out alone, it must have looked to our President then as though our country would soon be alone in all the world by holding on to these ideals of civilization in any real sense. Our country

sheltered many British children and accepted many refugees from Hitler's Europe, but not all. Looking back in retrospect, it is a pity that we did not accept many, many more. Whole shiploads of the persecuted were turned back, a safe harbor being denied them by those in our State Department who thought that America had already accepted enough of such 'immigrant trash.'

For one American poet, that 'immigrant trash,' their desperate circumstances and this country's willingness not only to accept them but to allow them to become Americans, represented a new wonder of the world, a nation dedicated to the rescue of those on whom other nations had turned their backs and shut their doors. A daughter of parents whose Portuguese Jewish ancestors had arrived in the Dutch colony of New Netherlands and who had worked hard and prospered in New Amsterdam/New

York City for many generations, Emma Lazarus excelled as an educator, novelist, playwright, literary critic, translator and correspondent with the great minds of the age, among them Ralph Waldo Emerson. But the cause into which she truly poured her heart and soul was the education of newly arrived Jewish refugees from the pogroms in Czarist Russia. Four years before her death at the age of 38, she wrote that poem which, neither then nor now, would pass muster in the U. S. Congress but which was accepted by the Statue of Liberty committee and expresses the noble soul of this nation which has chosen to have no earthly king:

**Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command**

**The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"**

We Americans may not be able to relate easily to the image of a monarch on this Christ the King Sunday, but we can relate to that, unless we have completely forgotten our own roots and origins. I know just enough about the only two European ancestors of mine to know that they would have understood and identified with the poem through which the Statue of Liberty still speaks to the nation and the world, long, long before the French People gave us that majestic gift and long, long before Emma Lazarus gave that gift a name and a voice.

That voice has been heard around the world, more clearly perhaps than here at home in the country of immigrants. To this day still they line up in their thousands to apply for an entry visa, sometimes waiting for years, or risk their lives as human cargo, all simply to have a chance to live in a country in which the four freedoms are not just ideals, but ideals which can be realized: expressing an opinion or voting without fear of brutal repression on the street or a knock on the door in the middle of the night; solid, palpable freedom from religious persecution or the persecution of religion, freedom from the constant fear of being suddenly robbed of the necessities of life because of government fiat, or because of a society too weak to provide for the needs and wants of any but the strong and rich who can pay their own way.

Emma Lazarus gave a name to both the Statue of Liberty and to America in her great poem. That name is ‘Mother of Exiles,’ a name that could be applied to another young Jewish woman, through whose living faith there *is* a refuge for those in bondage to sin, in bondage to the fear of death, for those yearning to be free to stand before God without fear that that freedom will be snatched away by the world.

Saint Paul the Apostle, who, though as free as any Roman citizen would know the bondage of prison chains and death at the hands of Roman justice, reminded the Christians of Colossæ that, though they might face the same fate, they had already been, as he puts it, ‘transferred’ into the kingdom of God the Father’s beloved Son. Paul is using courtroom language here. What happens to those who believe God’s promises in Jesus Christ? They are

‘transferred’ from the jurisdiction, from the judgment, the condemnation and penalties of this world of sin and death and the prince of this world to *another* kingdom, a kingdom different in kind from the powers of this world, the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God. They, we, you and I, are *transferred* by God’s grace, rescued from dying under the fear of death, rescued from destroying what is left of the image of God in us through sin, through living as less than we are created to be, and we are now safe where God alone reigns and the Devil has no say over us whatsoever.

Our visa to enter that territory of the soul and that way of living in the world where Christ rules has been granted. What is more, that brings with it *citizenship*, permanent residence where God reigns as sovereign, and we need fear nothing. This declaration of citizenship in the

Kingdom of Heaven has your name and the indelible imprint of your Baptism on it. It is valid not for a limited time, but for all eternity if you truly want to claim the freedom it offers and the refuge it opens to us and to all. Praised be to Jesus Christ, Our Heavenly King, both now and forever! ✠ Amen.

NOW to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a Kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. ✠ Amen.

