

God Uses the Movement of People for His Purposes

1. **My name is Anya Holcomb**, Pastor of Refugee Ministries at SAC in Salem, OR.
 - a. **I've heard about ACAC for years** – have dear friends here through the Refugee & Immigrant Network of the Alliance. From what I can tell, similar heart & DNA between our churches. It's a joy to be here.
 - b. **Married to my husband Doug**, we have 4 kids ***Photo - Family**
 - c. **Doug and I called to the nations at a young age**. We became international workers with the Alliance. Had to come home early due to some family needs, and God opened the door for us to start a refugee ministry in my hometown of Salem, OR. It's been an amazing journey that I'll share more about as we go.

2. **We're in week 3 of mission's month** at ACAC where we're focusing on the **Power of Proximity – loving the nations and neighborhoods where they are**.
 - a. **And this week, we're going to explore what God does through the Power of Proximity** with the nations who are **in** our neighborhoods.
 - b. **You see, we are experiencing an unprecedented amount of human geographic movement in our world today**, as more people than ever in global history are living outside of their home nations.
 - c. **Here are some quick statistics:**
 - **1 in 27 people in the world today are international migrants**, living outside the country in which they were born
 - **There are currently 51.9 million immigrants in the US, representing about 15.4 percent of the U.S. population.** This means that approximately **1 in 7 people living in America today were not born here.**
 - **People move around for a whole variety of reasons** – employment, joining family members, climate disasters, poverty, education opportunities, as well as **forcible displacement** from their home countries due to war, persecution or violence. The situations in Afghanistan, Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar, Democratic Republic of Congo, are clear examples of this.
 - **There are currently 117.3 million forcibly displaced people in the world, including 42.5 million refugees**

3. **As we hear these statistics & think about the nations who are in our neighborhoods** - immigrants and refugees who have moved here from far-away lands - I'm guessing this may bring up a variety of different thoughts and feelings in our current cultural & political climate. **There are many lenses that we can see our world through** & as believers, I'd like to invite us to look at international migration through a **Kingdom lens**. For the next 30 minutes, let's put on our Kingdom glasses and think about the global movement of people from God's big-picture perspective.

4. Here's what I'd like to pose to us this morning - **God uses the movement of people for His purposes**. He uses the **literal, physical, geographic** movement of people **from one part of the world to another** – *putting us in proximity with people from different cultures, languages, backgrounds & belief systems* - to accomplish His plans and purposes for our lives and for the world.
- a. **As we look at geographic movement in Scripture**, we see many examples of God using a physical change of location to bring about his purposes. We see it through stories of **individual people** moving from one place to another, and through large **groups of people** moving from one place to another. For example:
- We see it when God calls **Abraham** to leave his homeland
 - We see it when **Joseph** is taken to Egypt
 - We see it in the **flight** of Israel from Egypt
 - We see it as the people wander in the **wilderness**
 - We see it in the exile to **Babylon**
 - We see it at **Pentecost** when Jews from every nation are gathered in Jerusalem when HS comes.
 - We see it when **persecution** scatters the early church
 - We see it when **Paul** is sent to Rome.
 - In all of these geographic movements, **God has a purpose!**
- b. ***Photo – Welcome** And this is something we've seen over & over again in our work with immigrants & refugees.
- **Many of our global neighbors left heartbreaking** and tragic situations that are evidence of the immense brokenness in the world. And yet, in the midst of these painful situations, we see God working both **in** and **through** our new friends in powerful ways.
- c. You see, **God uses the movement of people to bring about 2-way transformation – transformation in people who move, and transformation in places they go.**
- d. **Today I'd like to share 4 stories** with you that illustrate these **2 big ideas** – how God transforms people who move, and how God transforms places they go.
- e. **2 of these stories** come from the **Bible**, and 2 come from personal **experiences** with our global neighbors.
5. Let's start with the first big idea: **God uses the movement of people to transform people who move.**
- a. Our first story is found in the book of **Ruth chapters 1 - 4.**
- **Israelite family in Bethlehem** (mom, dad & 2 sons) who are struggling to survive through a famine. In search of food, they move into the land of Moab, which is modern day Jordan.
 - **There, the father dies, and the 2 sons marry** Moabite women, Ruth & Orpah. The sons then die as well, leaving only the mom Naomi and her 2 daughters-in-law.
 - **Naomi tells Ruth & Orpah that she's moving back home to Israel.** She encourages them to stay behind in Moab because she knows that the life of an unmarried foreign

widow in Israel will not be a good one. Orpah agrees, but Ruth insists on going with Naomi.

- **So the two of them return to Israel (you can see their route on the map) with Ruth as a widowed immigrant** from a land that was a historic enemy of Israel. She has no husband or father to provide for her or protect her – critical in that time and culture. Her future is not looking bright at this point.
- **Once they get to Israel, Ruth goes out in search of food** and happens to end up picking grain in the field of Naomi's relative, Boaz. He notices Ruth and, after finding out her story, he shows incredible generosity to her. He makes special provisions for her to gather grain in his field, following a command from Deuteronomy 24 on providing for foreigners & widows.
- **Naomi is thrilled when she finds this out, because Boaz is one of their "family redeemers."** This was a cultural practice in Israel where if a man died and left behind a wife, it was a "family redeemer's" responsibility to marry the widow and protect the family.
- **Naomi and Ruth make a plan & Ruth goes to meet Boaz** on his farm at night and asks if Boaz will redeem the family and marry her. Boaz is amazed by Ruth's loyalty to Naomi and calls her a "woman of noble character."
- **The very next day, he redeems Ruth and Naomi legally** before the town elders. Then he marries Ruth. Soon Ruth becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son named Obed.
- **And the book of Ruth ends simply with a genealogy *Ruth 4:13b & 17b** – a genealogy that shows how Boaz and Ruth's son, Obed, was the grandfather of King David. And through King David came the lineage of Jesus the Messiah, the son of God.
- **We see in this story how God used the courageous geographic movement of Ruth** from Moab to Israel to bring her into proximity with a "family redeemer," and transform her life from a destitute widow to a key player in God's grand story of redemption for the whole world.

b. **Now I'd like to share a modern-day story** with you about one of my friends who came here as a refugee - I will call him **Abtin *Photo – Abtin**

- **Abtin grew up as a Muslim** in a Muslim family
- **When war & violence in his home country** threatened his life, he came as a refugee to Oregon.
- **When he first arrived, he was placed in a host home** with a Christian family where he lived for several months
- **As they go to know each other, he began attending church** with them and they started studying the Bible together
- **Through studying scripture and learning the story of Jesus**, he gave his life to Christ and was baptized.
- **This decision ostracized him** from his family & community both here and in his home country.

- **But he has stayed strong in his faith.** He told us that as he looks back on his life, he sees how God was guiding every part of his story and his move across the world to bring him to Jesus.
 - **God used Abtin's movement** from his home country as a refugee to put him in proximity with Christ-followers, so he could learn about Jesus, and his life could be transformed for all of eternity.
- c. **We see in both the stories** of Ruth & Abtin how God uses the movement of people to transform people who move.

6. **So here's my 1st invitation for us: *Let's join God in his transformative work in the lives of our global neighbors***

a. **God's heart for immigrants is clear throughout scripture.**

- **Now the word "immigrant" is relatively new.** It's built on the modern idea of immigration, which assumes national borders and laws about legal residency. For most of human history, those borders & laws didn't exist the way they do today.
- **Ancient languages like Hebrew & Greek used words like *foreigner, stranger, or sojourner*** to describe someone living outside of their place of birth. So when you hear those words mentioned in scripture, know that they're being used to describe the same human experience as that of a modern-day immigrant.
- **Over 35 times in the Old Testament, God says to Love Immigrants** – foreigners, strangers & sojourners. He commands his people to love the foreigner as they love themselves, and ties this to a reminder that they were also foreigners in the land of Egypt.
- **And all of his commands to Love Immigrants always have action steps** attached to them – Love immigrants – pay them a fair wage, Love immigrants – treat them as citizens, Love immigrants – give them the same access to justice, Love immigrants – invite them into the feasts and festivals, Love immigrants – make sure they have food & clothing, Love immigrants – and do something about that love.
- **Now why does God repeat himself 35 times?** Well, in the Ancient Near East, law codes for many people groups often carried the same moral call: "Protect the poor, the widow, and the orphan." ***Circle slide** Caring for these 3 groups was the standard measure of justice in the ancient world – a society was judged by how it treated its most powerless members. But none of these law codes mentioned foreigners.
- **This is what makes the Biblical command to love immigrants so revolutionary** – and probably why it's repeated so many times: God expands the circle ***2 circle slide** – He adds the foreigner to the list of those who must be protected, loved & included. The foreigner/the stranger, the one the world dehumanizes and views as a threat, outsider or burden – and God says, **"Not in my family!** In my family, we don't just care for "our own" vulnerable. My heart is so big that outsiders are included in. And as my people, I want you to live out my heart."

- **As we move into the New Testament**, Jesus shows us this heart on full display as he shows & teaches his disciples to care for the least of these, welcome the stranger, understand who their neighbor is, and to make disciples of **all** nations.
- b. **So it is literally living out the heart of God when we** **3 slides welcome our global neighbors with love and care, support them practically as they rebuild their lives in our communities, and share the hope & story of Jesus.*
- c. **We have nations in our neighborhoods from some of the most resistant and unreached countries in the world** **Photo - Afghans* – Afghanistan, Somalia, Pakistan, Iran – places where it's difficult and dangerous to send international workers – and we have new friends from these people groups **right at our doorstep**. Going to our kid's schools, shopping at the same grocery stores, living in the house down the street.
- d. **What an opportunity** we have been given in this place, at this time in history, to join God's transformative work in all nations.
- e. **Some of the ways we've done this at our church** **Baraka photos* in Salem are through an English ministry, a Soccer program, an International Prayer Gathering, an Immigration Legal Center, a Workforce Development Program, good neighbor teams & home visits.
- f. **Here at ACAC**, I know you have the incredible ministry of the **Christian Immigration Advocacy Center**, you have **Global Neighbor Ministries**, you're opening a **new Global Welcome Center**. These are all amazing ways to be in proximity with our global neighbors, to meet their practical needs, build relationships with them, and join God in his transformative work in their lives. These ministries will be represented in the lobby today.

7. And now let's look at the second big idea: *God uses the movement of people to transform places they go.*

- a. **Our next story comes from** *Daniel 6* – the story of Daniel in the Lion's Den. Many of us are probably familiar with this story but let's refresh our memories with the **context**:
 - **Daniel was a Jewish youth** from Jerusalem. When the Israelites disobeyed God, He gave them into the hands of the Babylonians. Daniel was among the group that was taken into **captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon** by King Nebuchadnezzar.
 - **This map shows the 1700 mile route** from ancient Jerusalem to Babylon.
 - **Once in Babylon**, Daniel found favor with the king and his successors and served them in various positions – **while always remaining faithful to God**.
 - Another king - **King Darius** – came to power.
- b. **And this is where our story begins:**
 - **King Darius is setting up rulers** and administrators to oversee his kingdom, and he becomes so impressed with Daniel that he decides to **promote him to the highest position** in the kingdom, 2nd only to himself.
 - **Daniel's colleagues are not happy** about this & are filled with jealousy and anger – a foreigner, an exiled slave, is going to be their boss – and they are not having it.
 - **So they contrive a plan** that exploits the king's ego – they tell him to make a law that anyone who prays to any God or person other than the king for the next 30 days will be **thrown into the lion's den**.

- Daniel hears about this law, but he continues to pray to God, 3 times a day, as he always has.
- His colleagues find him praying and report it to the king.
- King Darius is distressed, and tries to save Daniel. But the men remind him that the law he made cannot be changed.
- So the king reluctantly gives the order for Daniel to be thrown into the lions' den.
- First thing in the morning, the king rushes to the lions' den and calls out to Daniel, asking if his God has been able to rescue him.
- Daniel tells the king that his God sent an angel, and shut the mouths of the lions.
- The king is overjoyed and gives orders to get Daniel out of the den.
- Then King Darius sends this message to the people of every race and nation and language throughout the world: *"Peace and prosperity to you! I decree that everyone throughout my kingdom should tremble with fear before the God of Daniel. For he is the living God, and he will endure forever. His kingdom will never be destroyed, and his rule will never end. (Daniel 6:25 – 26)*
- What an amazing story of God using the geographic movement of Daniel, as an exiled slave, to bring him in proximity with powerful leaders who did not know God & to make the true God known to an entire Kingdom!

c. Now I'd like to share a modern-day story with you about one of my dear friends, Adela, **Photo - Adela* who came to Salem as a refugee and is now a pastor at SAC **Show Adela video*

- I've known Adela **Photo - Adela* since she first arrived in Salem, and I continue to marvel at the story of how God clearly brought her to this place at this time - our **very own missionary sent to Salem** as a refugee via the U.S. Department of State. My life, and the lives of my husband & my kids & so many others in our church & our city, have been profoundly blessed and impacted by her life and leadership.

d. We see in both the stories of Daniel & Adela how God uses the movement of people to transform places they go.

8. So here's my 2nd invitation for us: *Let's be ready for God to transform our lives & our churches through our global neighbors*

a. To do this, I believe we must *begin with a posture of humility and a recognition of the value our global neighbors bring to us.*

- We must recognize that our Western way of doing life & our Western way of doing church is **not the only way**. It's not the only way and it's not the best way. It's simply a way. Those from other cultures have so many valuable things to teach us – things that give us a **richer and fuller picture of God's kingdom**.

b. And then we need to *seek out opportunities to learn from and be led by our global neighbors*. Invite them to our dinner tables, listen to their experiences & insights, ask them to share their gifts & talents, invite them into leadership circles, develop relationships of mutuality & reciprocity.

- **My husband was at the Alliance World Fellowship** conference in Ivory Coast last month – a gathering of Alliance leaders from all over the world who come together every 4 years to learn from each other and look big-picture at what God is doing globally.

- **One of the global trends they pointed out** was the difference between what's happening with the church in the **Global North** vs. the church in the **Global South**.

***Graph**

- **Overall, Christianity is in decline in the Global North** (US, Canada, Europe) with church attendance decreasing over the past few decades and post-Christian culture taking a greater & greater influence. **According to Barna research**, the number of practicing Christians in the U.S. has **dropped by more than half** since the year 2000 from 45% down to 20% today.

- **But in the Global South** (Africa, Latin America, Asia), people are coming to Christ in record numbers, churches are growing, and believers are sharing the gospel with passion, innovation & dependence on the Holy Spirit. All this is often in the midst of suffering, persecution and lack of resources.

- **Many of the immigrants and refugees coming to the US are these very believers** from the Global South - strong Christ-followers with a tested faith. And I believe that God wants to use these brothers & sisters from around the world to **bless, challenge and revive** the American church.

- **We need to go beyond welcoming** & supporting them as they resettle in our communities - we need to **go further** and live as true brothers and sisters in Christ – giving them a place at the table in our communities & churches, and ministering alongside them.

c. **We're on a journey with this at Salem Alliance** as more & more refugees and immigrants are becoming part of our church family. It is growing, stretching and challenging us in beautiful ways.

- Here's a photo of a **recent membership class**, where 40 of our global neighbors signed up to become members of the church.

- And here's a photo of our global neighbors **leading multi-lingual worship** and blessing the congregation with their gifts.

d. **I know that an essential part of ACAC's DNA is being a diverse community** of faith. And you're living it. Sunday morning is still one of the most segregated hours in America – **8 out of 10 churches** in the US are made up of one predominate racial or ethnic group. **Thank you** for leading the way & modeling diverse community for the American Church. This positions you so well to welcome global neighbors as leaders and contributors in your church family.

9. Today we have seen how **God uses the movement of people to bring about 2-way transformation – transformation in people who move, and transformation in places they go.**

- a. **We are invited to join God** in his transformative work in the lives of our global neighbors. And we are also invited to be ready for God to transform **our** lives & **our** churches **through** our global neighbors.
- b. **And as we do this, God can transform all of us** more and more into a reflection of the beautiful vision from **Revelation 7** – a multicultural multitude from **every** nation, tribe, people & language, gathered **together** in unity before our King.

10. Closing

- a. Invite prayer team forward
- b. Reminder that ushers will be at the door with offering baskets
- c. Close in worship