

Several weeks ago, January 27th, to be precise, several weeks ago, I was invited to the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees, affectionately known as The Center.¹ The Center works with refugees, helping them to get to safety here, find a place to stay, meet basic needs, file paperwork, learn English, the whole deal. Normally, the staff's incredibly busy, and the people coming in looking for help are a mixture of excited, worried, relieved, scared, and more than anything, grateful. But the day I was there was weird. It was exactly one week after Inauguration Day when an executive order went out preventing the US from accepting any new refugees.² This was bad news for the folks at The Center, but it wasn't earth-shattering. It meant the three or four people on staff whose job it had been to help get refugees to the US had to be reassigned to other projects. They were disappointed, angry even, but the day-to-day operations of The Center weren't massively disrupted.

The person I met with shared some information I hadn't heard before. First off, legally speaking, being a refugee is a technical definition. Most of us think of refugees as people fleeing war or targeted persecution, which is true, but from the perspective of governments and agencies like The Center, "refugee" is a legal status that differs from all other kinds of immigration.³ Even "asylum seekers" don't meet the same legal definition of refugees. In some ways this makes a lot of sense if we're thinking about how to allocate resources and bring people to safety. But in others, it's a little weird 'cause the different meanings of the word muddle the political discourse. The Ukrainian family in town, for example, are refugees in the regular sense, but legally speaking, they're something else. More on that later.

Refugees occupy a unique international status, and because of the sensitivity of bringing an individual or even a large number of individuals into a different country, they are heavily vetted. Like, a lot. Some end up in the process to achieve refugee status for more than 20 years, and they go through extensive security checks, sometimes as many as 8 layers.⁴ In other words, of all the categories of immigrants coming to the United States, by the time they're actually granted that status, no other immigration cohort has been more thoroughly vetted. The Center helps these folks arrive here and then establish new lives in safety. They help them with just about everything: housing, food, clothing, transportation, finding work, learning English, filing the mountains of continuous paperwork and legal hurdles, working towards citizenship if that's desired, how to drive on the other side of the road, even navigating those weird cultural differences that're bound to come up. I was impressed by all that they offer, but I wasn't surprised since we went through something similar when we welcomed that Ukrainian family back in 2022. I was floored then by the amount of energy and time and sometimes money that was needed to get them settled in, and then once they were settled, how many things kept springing up.

Well, my host at The Center started giving me a tour and pointed out different classrooms and services, and just as we were really getting rolling, another employee with an exasperated look about her interrupted our conversation. With a cell phone held to her ear like she was still on a call, she said to my host, "Hey, can I talk to you for a minute." My host hesitated and pointed to me to indicate she was kinda busy showing someone around, and the employee just said, "I'm sorry, but we really need to talk about this right now." My host apologized, sent me back to her office to wait, and disappeared. And when my host finally returned, she had

¹ <https://www.thecenterutica.org/donate/>

² <https://immigrationforum.org/article/summary-of-president-trumps-executive-order-on-the-u-s-refugee-program/>

³ <https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=granuleid%3AUSC-prelim-title8-section1101&num=0&edition=prelim>

⁴ [https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/refugees-and-asylum/refugees/refugee-processing-and-security-screening#:~:text=R
efugee%20Processing%20and%20Security%20Screening%20*%20DOS,System%20\(IDENT%20%E2%80%93%20formely%20known%20as%20US%20DVISIT\)](https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/refugees-and-asylum/refugees/refugee-processing-and-security-screening#:~:text=Refugee%20Processing%20and%20Security%20Screening%20*%20DOS,System%20(IDENT%20%E2%80%93%20formely%20known%20as%20US%20DVISIT))

tears in her eyes. While I was there, mid-tour, The Center received a stop work order.⁵ The restrictions against refugees had just expanded, and suddenly, The Center could no longer provide assistance to any person who had been in the United States for fewer than 90 days. In other words, in the most acute period of need, they couldn't help in any way at all. This was a Monday, and over the weekend prior, a new refugee family had just arrived in Utica. This stop work order meant that that family, and many others, would get no help. None. Imagine our Ukrainian family had been dropped in Hamilton without an apartment, without food, without winter clothes, without transportation, without translation, and without any of us or the community's donations to help. I sat with my host for a few minutes digesting while her eyes brimmed with fresh tears, baffled by cruelty and the disregard for everything these people had been through and were fleeing from. On top of that, at least 25% of The Center's workforce immediately saw their job descriptions disappear. It became clear pretty quickly that I needed to clear out so they could figure out what to do next.

In case you've forgotten, here's a quick reminder of the sort of things refugees flee from. There's a Sudanese population in Syracuse, many of which are part of the infamous "Lost Boys of Sudan" who were separated from their parents through all sorts of nasty means. I spoke with one of them at a Diocesan Convention a few years ago who told his story of fleeing into the wilderness as a child by himself, a journey that actually included being chased by a lion, and being chased by an honest to God lion was preferable to what he left behind or what he was left behind with. Y'all know the stories from refugees can get much worse, but I'm not gonna revel in their suffering from the pulpit. But I will remind you of some of what the Ukrainian family endured. A quick caveat: remember, they're not *technically* refugees. They're here under what's called temporary protected status, which was instituted as a way to get them to safety as fast as possible, but if it looks like a refugee and flees like a refugee, it just might be a refugee.

Now, I'm not speaking out of school here, these are things they told us in our Parish Hall when they made us that enormous thank you meal of borscht. They told us that when they first found a way out, they thought it was a scam but they trusted us anyway because they figured even if they got scammed it couldn't be any worse than what they were already living through. Once everything was in order and all they needed to do was hop on a bus to safety, they were still afraid because the Russians targeted buses of fleeing civilians. When they first arrived here, the grandmother needed medical attention for a knee she'd injured while running to the safety of a bomb shelter. The 16-year old daughter was hesitant to come out of her room because she'd gotten so used to hiding from Russian soldiers who'd weaponized rape. The young boy woke the neighbors at night and was the reason for more than a few noise complaints because he screamed in his sleep reliving horrendous memories come back to life. They ended that day in the Parish Hall with us with grateful tears saying they felt like they'd found their way to Heaven on Earth. But now, word's gotten out that they and the rest of the 240,000 Ukrainian refugees seeking shelter in the United States are likely to be deported next month.⁶

Somehow, things've gotten all twisted. As a nation, we've become accustomed to our international status. We've tread on lions and adders for the good of the world. Sometimes we've only convinced ourselves that the ones we tread on are lions and adders, but lately we've changed the target of our boots to the lambs living among us. Refugees are the target of lies and slander. Remember "they're eating the dogs?" There's no evidence of that happening, and when asked about it, the now vice-president said it didn't matter if it was true, if it meant he could further his aims he'd just - and I quote - "create stories."⁷ As it turns out, across the board,

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/06/nx-s1-5309763/refugees-limbo-trump-freeze-resettlement-programs>

⁶ <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/5181118-trump-temporary-protected-status/>

⁷ <https://www.npr.org/2024/09/15/nx-s1-5113140/vance-false-claims-haitian-migrants-pets>

refugees are half as likely to commit violent crimes than the rest of us.⁸ If you're actually worried about violence, you might as well arrest all of us here 'cause we're statistically more likely to be a threat.

There was a time when we believed America was the Promised Land. The Emma Lazarus poem at the base of the Statue of Liberty says Lady Liberty is the "Mother of Exiles" and her torch "glows world-wide welcome." She cries 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-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" Now we'll let someone buy citizenship for a cool \$5 million.⁹¹⁰ While we were the Promised Land for many, we were Egypt for others. But we convinced ourselves that our land tried to be better. The Preamble to the Constitution says we form "a more perfect union," that we're always striving to improve, to recognize our imperfections, and to grow ever more perfect. Maybe that was true, maybe it wasn't, but at least it named a longing of our populus to be known for our goodness. Heaven on Earth maybe not, but we wanted to get as close to that as we could. Some of us have always benefited from the systems and structures of this land and are beginning to experience true dread for the first time. We're mercifully leagues away from the worst our own Egypt imposed, but somehow, we've gone and put Pharoah in control. What we need now is a new Moses to lead us through the Wilderness and back to milk and honey, but this time milk and honey for all where the Lord is our refuge and everyone's bodies are finally safe.

There was a time when Jesus was known as the new Moses. In Matthew, John, and Hebrews at least, he's the one who will deliver us. But if we follow him, we follow him into the desert first. Wash, be made clean, and follow Jesus into the desert where there are no comforts, only truth. Truth and the Devil. I caught something in that story this time around that spikes my level of concern for the days ahead. When Jesus goes into the desert, the Devil's out there. And the Devil doesn't just tempt Jesus with power and authority and worship. He tempts Jesus with scripture. Even the Devil knows the Bible, which should be unnerving for us who deal in scripture every day. 5 years ago that Bible, held upside down as a prop, was used to justify tear-gassing one of my seminary classmates off the front steps of his church. 4 years ago, that Bible was touted on the senate floor by insurrectionists and then wrapped in the Constitution to be sold for profit. Last year, a 900-page document claiming to follow scripture began masquerading as the way forward under the eye of God himself. Now, I'm not saying the people who did those things are the Devil, but I am saying the Devil would be mighty impressed by what they've accomplished. In no world can I imagine the misery inflicted by Bible-wielding zealots as God's desire for us, but that is the world we've found ourselves in, a world where arming yourself with scripture and a desire for profit is all you need to get ahead. Well, that and white skin, the right kind of attraction, the right kind of background, the right kind of voting record, the right kind of speech, and the right amount of money.¹¹ That's all it takes to navigate the new or not-so-new American Wilderness. Would that more of our leaders would heed Jesus's final words in the wilderness, the words that ran the Devil off. After temptations and blasphemies, Jesus simply tells the Devil, "Do not put God to the test." I don't love the idea of a vengeful God, but as the wilderness yawning before us grows ever more threatening, I'm beginning to get it. It's our job to live faithfully and do all we can to repair what is broken and to move ourselves closer in relationship to our God. It's not our job to require any of that of anyone else, but I sure do wonder what happens when the Divine's had enough of so many putting God to the test.

⁸https://www.jrsusa.org/story/supporting-refugees-dispelling-misconceptions-and-fulfilling-our-duty/?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQiA8q--BhDiARIsAP9tKI0fRv-S6rpGfnDVaT_wnhUfZ5bGERkGuQ3tjVnUZkl6ehAuuFoO98aArguEALw_wcB

⁹ <https://www.breitbart.com/immigration/2025/02/25/trump-promises-5-million-gold-cards-for-foreigners-to-buy-citizenship/>

¹⁰ <https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/25/politics/us-gold-card-foreigners-trump/index.html>

¹¹ <https://apnews.com/article/trump-loyalty-white-house-maga-vetting-jobs-768fa5cbcf175652655c86203222f47c>

I've mentioned this many times before, but until something changes drastically, it bears repeating. The Bible doesn't make a distinction between legal refugees and those with Temporary Protected Status. But that scripture that devils and angels both like to quote is pretty clear on how to treat the foreigner in our land. Foreigners show up in the Bible more than 400 times, and we're overwhelmingly told to extend kindness to them. Of all places, Leviticus is emblematic of this, "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself." That's it. That's our job. Wilderness or no, love 'em.

I don't have a tidy way to wrap this up. The story of our Ukrainian friends has been repeated a quarter-of-a-million times by communities all over this country embracing, loving, and befriending families just like the ones here, but the end is still wide open. There's still time to save them from expulsion. And if not, talk to me later. I don't know what will happen with them, but I know what our scriptures actually tell us to do. I'll give you a hint: it doesn't involve teaming up with ICE. I don't have a tidy way to end this, so I'll leave us right there alongside Jesus, staring into the wilderness and wondering what happens when devils push God too far. I pray the cruelty comes to an end. I pray threats leave vulnerable people be. I pray Christians remember what Christ truly taught. And I pray we all survive the Wilderness that lays ahead.