

March 9, 2025
Refugee Sunday sermon
John Hennessy

Thank you for inviting me to worship and speak with you this morning.

The lessons for the first Sunday in Lent, which coincide with Refugee Sunday in the Diocese of Maine, might be viewed as a blueprint for our Lenten journey. They encompass the themes of journeying: travel, protection, and longing for a destination. Throughout the world today, people are on the move. Historically, we have witnessed one of the largest migrations of human beings.

Our spiritual ancestors were wanderers, strangers, who found their Creator amid the wilderness. Today, at the beginning of our Lenten journey, we should remember that we were once strangers, immigrants, and wanderers.

Lent is a significant season in our liturgical calendar. It is a time of reflection, penance, and spiritual growth—a time for the church to reflect on its presence and mission in the world. It is my honor to share this reflection with you this morning.

Mission is an integral part of our worship and our identity as Episcopalians. Identity and mission are interconnected.

When we listen to and follow Jesus' example, we become active agents in God's mission to support our immigrant siblings. Our church is a visible, compassionate face and voice for immigrants and refugees who have come to our country in search of safety for themselves and their families. We are a loving spiritual community supporting those whose lives are threatened and upended because

of their status in our country. We are a people of faith who help vulnerable populations through prayer and action, letting them know that others pray for them and have their best interest at heart.

That sometimes calls the church into noisy, messy, risky, and occasionally dark contexts to witness God's redeeming and liberating love in Jesus Christ.

I have been the diocese's public advocacy director for almost ten years. This remains a part-time consultant position as I am not on the Loring House staff. I have worked with people in our churches to help them develop or transform into a community of faith-based advocates. I have also shared my faith-based advocacy work for several semesters with students at **Bexley Seabury Seminary**. I have been a deputy at the **General Convention** twice and co-facilitated several **Sacred Ground** sessions. Two weeks ago, I was elected senior warden of the cathedral.

Our public policy ministry advocates for immigrants, refugees, and LGBTQ+ people. We have worked with legislators to support people living on low incomes and in unhoused situations. We have put our faith into action to support common-sense gun safety reforms, access to reproductive and gender-affirming health care, banning conversion therapy, secure access to vaccines, creation care, and more.

I want to explain precisely how public policy positions are determined in our church. First, if the General Convention has passed a resolution on a topic in favor of or opposed to something, we say, "The Episcopal Church believes...." In between conventions, the Executive Council is empowered to act on behalf of the church. Without the General Convention or Executive Council, the Diocese of Maine can pass resolutions at our annual Convention that do not

contradict the General Convention. In that case, we say, “The Episcopal Diocese of Maine believes...” Sometimes, the Bishop may speak for himself on an issue as the Bishop of Maine. Finally, people of faith can speak for themselves as individuals, being sure not to invoke the parish, diocese, or the wider church, if no policy has been formally decided.

The **Episcopal Diocese of Maine** is an active partner and supporter of the **Maine Council of Churches**. In coordination with **Episcopal Migration Ministries**, the **Episcopal Public Policy Network**, based in Washington, and our diocesan public policy network, we advocate with the U.S. Congress, Governor Mills, executive agencies at the federal and state level, and the Maine legislature.

One of the things we focus on is relationships. We must relate well with our policymakers on both sides of the aisle. Our work is faith-based public policy, and while that indeed involves politics, it does not include partisanship. **The preaching of the Good News is not partisan.**

The preaching of the Good News should be holistic. You cannot go and preach the Good News and leave a person to die due to lack of food, shelter, or health care. You need to help them. When we say the Lord’s Prayer and ask God “to give us this day our daily bread,” we pray for God’s provision, but we also live out that prayer with action. We must care for our neighbor. We must take practical action. **This means campaigning or lobbying and doing faith-based advocacy.**

As the world goes through what seems like an endless night, the church is called to engage, not retreat. It is called to help transform fear into hope and oppression into liberation. The church’s identity is entangled with her mission to be an agent of liberation and freedom.

Such a mission requires that the church overcomes neutrality or fear. It entails engaging the messiest conditions and conflicts and getting our hands dirty. It encompasses action to dismantle systems of injustice and oppression. It believes there is no sphere the church may not speak or engage in. It entails a prophetic denunciation of everything that seeks to undo God's dream for God's world. **And yes, it anticipates criticism and repudiation for the sake of God's mission.**

On this first Sunday of Lent, we are reminded that our Lenten journey need not be soft or quiet. A faithful Christian witness will testify in the legislature or the public square about what they have experienced. Christian witness is giving and receiving the Good News of salvation in Christ with others. It is prayerfully sharing in the power of the Holy Spirit and leaving the rest to God.

Several Episcopal Churches in the greater Portland area, including St. Bart's, have been meeting to discover how we might all Walk Together as members of the Beloved Community in prayer, relationship building, advocacy, education, and service. These conversations have been productive and will likely expand to other churches in the diocese who share the same commitment to envisioning a world in which every immigrant and vulnerable community is welcome in our church, society, and nation.

I want to close this reflection with words of our Presiding Bishop, Sean Rowe, who shared this message with the church during his ceremonial seating at Washington National Cathedral last month. Bishop Rowe said, **"in this world order, falling comes before rising. In God's kingdom, immigrants and refugees, transgender people, the poor and the marginalized are not at the edges fearful and alone. They are at the center of the Gospel story."** Bishop Rowe goes on to say, **"we are not backing down in our proclamation of the Gospel just because other people who**

understand it differently are bigger or think they are more powerful or louder or have a vision that denies humanity.”

I will be with you after the service to answer any questions. I hope you will consider connecting with the **Maine Episcopal Public Policy Network** as we walk together and imagine Christ among us. All of us.