

“Foreign messengers of the gospel”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

About a month and a half ago, four staff of InterFaith Works stood before a crowd of 100 people and told the story of how thousands of refugees have come to find a home here in Central New York. Afterward, Daryl (who is here with us today) asked me about the possibility of inviting a former refugee to speak during worship.

Now, some of you might think that a preacher would jump at the chance to invite a guest speaker and thus be spared the many hours of sermon preparation. If you think this, you clearly do not know any preachers. Because if there’s one thing we preachers love more than hearing the good news, it’s hearing the good news come out of our own mouths. There’s a reason why “preacher” and “pride” both start with a *P*. And... “pastor”... and, “Patrick.”

So I told Daryl that I would have to think about it. What many of you don’t know is that I plan out my sermon topics four months in advance. I of course had to check this document and discern what wisdom, what beauty, what awesome power, I had planned for the 29th of October. So that’s what I did. I pulled up October 29, Reformation Sunday, and stared in disbelief at the title of my sermon: “Foreign messengers of the gospel.” It seemed that God had given me my answer... along with, maybe, a smack on the head.

It is thus my privilege to bring before you, in a few minutes, Maqdad Salehi to share his wise, beautiful, and powerful story. But not before you get a little bit of a sermon!

When Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica, he is a foreigner. He’s a Jew, a member of a conquered people; they are Gentiles, the citizens of a bustling Greek metropolis ruled by Rome, the greatest power in the world. He’s a migrant, fleeing harsh treatment in Philippi. And apparently, the people of Thessalonica are spreading rumors that Paul and his friends have come to their land to use, trick, and deceive them. They’re not good people, they’re saying.

Still, Paul comes to them. And in coming to them in spite of adversity, he shows them what courage is. And in coming to them, he shows them what love is. He writes, “So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves.”

Paul gives the Thessalonians everything—even his very person. It is a gift. At first, the Thessalonians probably think they are doing *him* favors. They don’t realize that they are the ones being saved.

We who are US-born citizens are always talking about how much immigrants need us (need our resources, our country, our faith, our jobs, our charity, our culture), and we’re always asking

whether we have enough to give. But what if we are the ones who need *them*? What if they have something to teach *us*—a faith, culture, and set of resources of their own? What if they are in fact messengers from God, here to show us what courage means—what love means?

The Thessalonians were so afraid that Paul was there to take from them that they failed to see what he gave to them—a friend, a man with truth and love that would change their lives. Paul gave them the best gift he could give. It was the same gift God gave in Jesus Christ. Paul gave them himself.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, it is written, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (13:2).

Paul was one of those angels, those foreign messengers of God. Who’s to say that the next immigrant to cross our borders won’t be another?

Let us welcome Mr. Salehi with a warm round of applause!