The Refugee Christ Art Sermon

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Exodus 19:2-8a By Patty Friesen June 18/23

Slide 1 - Marc Chagall's Exodus - If you hold your arms out like the crucified Jesus before you, you can just touch both edges of Marc Chagall's painting called Exodus (1952). It's an intimidating canvas to stand before, not just because of its size (6 feet long and 5 feet high.) but also because of its composition. First, Chagall who is Jewish, chooses Jesus, rather than Moses, to preside over Israel's flight from Egypt. Second, he inverts the traditional orientation of the scene so that we, the viewers, are not running with the people of Israel toward the Red Sea. Instead we are looking at them from the perspective of the sea itself. In a sense, we are the sea. The people are running directly at us. If we are the Red sea, will we part and let this endangered people pass on dry land? Will we welcome those running toward us?

This is not a typical exodus image of deliverance and celebration on the shores of the Red Sea. Here instead is a world at war—houses on fire, panicked women and children, men shouldering hurriedly packed sacks of treasured possessions including pet goats. Goats in Chagall paints suggest scapegoats from the book of Leviticus. The priests would symbolically put the sins of the people on the live goat that took away the sins from their camp into the wilderness. This Exodus image is an image not unlike those coming out of Ukraine. Simply put, what we see on Chagall's canvas does not simply reflect the exodus story from Egypt we know from the Bible. The ancient exodus of the Israelites is not the only exodus Chagall is depicting.

After World War II, a Zionist group working to create an independent Jewish state of Israel liberated from British controlled Palestine, bought a ship from the United States and renamed it the Exodus. In 1947 the ship transported more than 4,000 displaced Jewish Holocaust

survivors from France to British-controlled Palestine. While the ship was still far from shore, it was surrounded by British destroyers, refused entry, and rerouted back to France. Once there, the passengers refused to disembark and staged a hunger strike instead. This lasted more than three weeks. The French authorities were unwilling to remove them by force, so eventually the British rerouted them again, this time to Hamburg, then under British control—where, to add bitter irony to their plight, the refugees were held again in camps on German soil.

All of a sudden it's clear we are not looking solely at a biblical scene—we're looking at a Holocaust painting. We can be confident Chagall knew of this refugee ship event because another canvas of his, The Boat Exodus (1948), directly depicts it. But even in this later canvas Exodus, he paints a ship in the upper left corner. We also see the Holocaust image of a Jewish village set aflame. For Chagall, these terrified masses aren't just ancient Israelites, they are his suffering Jewish kin in the 1930s, 40's and 50's.

And here's where Jesus becomes important. For his Jewish audience, Chagall finds in Jesus a powerful solidarity with Jewish suffering. Chagall said that Jesus "symbolized the true Jewish martyr," and he frequently (though not here) depicts the crucified Jesus wearing a Jewish black-and-white tallit (prayer shawl). Jesus is not, for Chagall, the Christian Messiah but a brother Jew who died for his beliefs.

But Chagall's image says something much more pointed to his Western Christian audience: if Jesus is an archetype of Jewish suffering, then the person we claim to be God is actually the refugee you are refusing entry. The Jews killed or interned in camps are this Christ whom we worship. Chagall is cleverly using a Christian image to combat Christian antisemitism, to unveil the hypocritical logic behind whom Western Christians do and don't decide to welcome. We can't say we love Jesus with our lips and then hate Jewish people with our actions.

If Chagall's The Boat Exodus communicates this sharply and specifically to the British people who denied entry to Holocaust survivors in 1947, this later Exodus—grander in both artistic achievement and literal size—strikes the same note and then transforms it into a symphony that resounds through the decades. For you and me, the question is no longer, Will we welcome these endangered people? but rather, Will we welcome Christ himself? Not, Will we welcome mothers and their children? but instead, Will we receive the Madonna and child? Chagall positions them front and center, even depicting Mary in the traditional blue representing her humanity.

Chagall also plants the cross of Christ in the place of Moses 'staff before the sea. In doing so, he turns the same screw that Jesus does in Matthew's Gospel when speaking of the final judgment: "For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me" (Matt. 25:42–43).

There is no simple, one-to-one analogy between the survivors of the Holocaust and the refugees of Ukraine, but they have more in common than one might at first expect—and Chagall himself is right in the middle of their common ground. He was born in what is now Belarus, next door to Ukraine. His village was occupied and mostly destroyed by Nazis. And Chagall himself was later made a refugee from France because of the Nazi advance.

For Chagall, Jesus is an archetype of Jewish suffering and a challenge to Christians. Prior to the Holocaust, Ukraine had one of the largest Jewish populations in the world—more than 224,000, according to a 1939 census. The largest single massacre of the Holocaust took place in Kyiv, where 33,771 Jews were killed in two days at Babyn Yar. (An almost-finished Holocaust memorial there was recently bombed by Russia.) And still, amid those killed, fleeing, and fighting today, a significant Jewish population perseveres in Ukraine, including Jewish

President Volodymyr Zelensky. Israeli Jews with Ukrainian ancestry have been returning to help refugees in and around Ukraine as well.

Perhaps a Christian viewer of Exodus ought to do no more than sit with the sting of antisemitism Chagall rightly accuses us of. Indeed, there is plenty of antisemitism that remains in the church, and it must be rooted out. But as we are simultaneously confronted with the images of the war in Ukraine, and as our governments face the questions of whether, how, and how many refugees they will welcome, it seems appropriate, from a Christian perspective, to extend the Jewish specificity of Chagall's argument to all 5 million refugees of Ukraine, Jew and gentile alike.

We need not stop there. The same logic can expand to include all refugees fleeing every kind of conflict the world over. There is virtually no controversy in Canada over whether we should welcome refugees from Ukraine. But we are not so harmoniously united when it comes to refugees fleeing countries closer to home, including those fleeing natural disasters, poverty, political persecution, gang and drug-related violence in Latin America.

It is only because we see and know Jesus as particularly Jewish that we can see Jesus as representing any other ethnicity. God's identification with humanity in the incarnation of Jesus is not abstract. As James Cone famously said: Jesus is Black because Jesus was a Jew. The Jewish flesh of Jesus is the neck in the hourglass that opens up into another world of humanity on the other side.

Chagall's Exodus confronts Christians with a beautiful and haunting fact: when we look at the face of a refugee, we are looking at the face of Christ. We are looking at the face of the Madonna and her child. It offers us a pointed reminder that Christian opinion toward these questions of welcome should not be complicated—Christians welcome all, full stop, because

when we do, we welcome Christ himself. How beautiful. And when we don't, it is Christ we reject. How haunting. When Christians build walls to keep refugees and strangers out, we can be sure that Christ remains on the other side.

Chagall's Christ is on the cross, but upon closer inspection, his arms appear not so much nailed down as open for embrace. Stretching out our arms to mirror his—to receive him—is the entire point. When we welcome the world's refugees with open arms, we begin to look more and more like Christ, such that one day it will be like looking into a mirror. We become a Christ much like the one Chagall depicts, simultaneously refugee and deliverer, eyes closed in temporary defeat yet haloed already in everlasting glory, body marked by the yellow pallor of death yet somehow also glowing with new life like Moses 'face.

We become, in short, what we worship: our Lord Jesus Christ, who stretched out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of his saving embrace.

Slide of Lina's family. It's been a number of years since we sponsored Lina Al-Nouris and her 5 children with Wildwood Mennonite to come from Lebanon to join her parents and siblings in Saskatoon. Refugee sponsorship is a lot of work and money and we've probably needed a break. And yet I think we are at our best as a church in these efforts and those directly involved, there is the joy of relationship building along with the hard work of relationship building. I leave us with the question – is it time to consider sponsoring a refugee family again and not necessarily a Ukrainian family. Afghanis are still waiting to come to Canada as well. What do you think?

Let us pray: You who open doors and dismantle barriers, open our hearts to praise you, that we might live the full truth of who we are, that we might live as neighbours and friends, no

longer strangers and enemies; open our hearts to the transforming power of your love, that we

light forgive and reconcile, making peace and learning war no more, that we might be your

people, one body in one Spirit, to tell your grace to all the world. We pray in the name of the One

who walked among us as brother and friend. Amen. #862