

## **Sermon: Reckoned as Righteousness**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, June 11, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On the Friday evening of March 25, 2023, only minutes before midnight, there was a mad scramble at the irregular border crossing at the famed Roxham Road, Quebec. Earlier that day, the governments of Canada and the United States had jointly announced a modified 'Safe Third Country Agreement', effectively closing a loophole whereby migrants were no longer allowed to cross into Canada via irregular border entries.

For the past weeks, months, years, tens of thousands of migrants from all over the world had been flocking to Roxham Road, hoping be granted asylum status, wishing for a new start in this peaceful land. The announcement of the modification that day, caught most people by surprise, and as the deadline of midnight of March 25 loomed, people were scrambling, trying to get themselves through the crossing.

Mahamed Yusef Niazi made it, carrying his seven-month-old daughter Sahaba, and along with his wife Taiba Nuri. They had left Afghanistan after the Taliban retook the country. The couple first travelled to Iran, then back to Afghanistan, then to Pakistan, Brazil, through South America to Mexico and then the U.S. They made it to Canada just in time. So did Pamela Memento Maiala, carrying her four-month-old baby in a car seat and her five-year-old, Jefte, by her side. They started their journey from Congo, about a year and half ago. Pamela spoke a bit of French and some Portuguese she had picked up while in Brazil. The baby was born en route, and it was a rough pregnancy, as one could imagine.

They were the lucky ones but not so for Olivier Nanfah, a 42-year-old Cameroonian man, who arrived at 4 a.m. on Saturday morning, unaware of the change that already took place. Or for a dozen other migrants from countries such as Ecuador, Haiti, Congo, and others, as they gathered around a gas station to warm up and try to understand their predicament, their grim future. All because of a hastily announced, ill considered arbitrary deadline, rendering some refugees to be legal while others to be illegal.

Come to think of it, why do we have these arbitrary category of legal or illegal? By what moral authority do we make such a rule? Consider

Abraham, the father of nations and the father of faith. Would it surprise you learn that Abraham and Sarah were themselves law breakers in the Ancient Near East.

Let us, for the sake of this exercise, remove the stamp of approval that God had placed on his righteousness. Let us, for the sake of this exercise, remove what authors of various books of the Bible had said about his faith. Let us, for the sake of this exercise, use our modern tool of legal definition and moral superiority. What labels would and should we place on Abram (that was his former name) and Sarai (that was her former name)?

First and foremost, they were illegal migrants, when they crossed into Egypt without permission from the authority. They did so in time of a great famine; they did so seeking a better opportunity in a fertile land watered by the river Nile. Nevertheless, they were in fact not welcomed at all by the existing inhabitants of that land.

Abram was also a human trafficker, when he fraudulently presented his wife as his sister. He did so for his own safety but also for material gains, while the voiceless Sarai was essentially sold off for the sexual pleasure of other powerful man. Worse still, after God confirmed the covenant with Abram in Genesis 20, thus changing his name to Abraham, he repeated the same criminal action again and trafficked his wife a second time.

What else can we say about Abraham? Oh yes, he is a irresponsible polygamist, a deadbeat dad, a child abuser, and had it not been for God's intervention, Abraham would surely have been a child killer. Should I go on? Do you get the point I am trying to make? Look, I am not going to excuse his criminal actions by citing circumstances beyond control. By any standard, modern or ancient, Abraham was a deeply flawed human being. If he was to be judged by human standards, he would surely be cancelled by most of us. Yet, God saw fit to reckon him otherwise.

The Apostle Paul cited Abraham, in his letter to the Romans, in chapter 4, as part of his argument for the theological concept of 'righteousness through faith'. Paul cited Abraham's faith, as "*hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So shall your descendants be."*" On that one singular issue when Abraham believed, in that one singular instance when Abraham trusted God, it was enough. It was enough that Abraham was reckoned as righteousness, by God.

Paul went on to argue that how much more, that *“it will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.”* Essentially, Paul is saying, if Abraham as flawed as he was, could be reckoned as righteousness, so can you and I.

We too are flawed human beings, some more than others. We too, should we be fully exposed, thoroughly judged, be all found wanting, by any standard, human or divine. For *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”*, as Paul puts it in Romans 3:23. And he carries on his argument that *“[we] are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”*

It is by God’s grace that we are not judged, sentenced, and executed. It is by God’s grace that we are, as Abraham, justified through faith and reckoned as righteousness. Paul concludes his theological argument at the end of Romans 4, *“It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.”*

I take comfort in knowing that Canada has committed to bring into the country each year, 1/2 of million of migrants in all categories, be it economic immigrants, students, professionals, re-unified families and refugees. I take comfort in knowing that St. Giles, as a community of faith, is playing its part as we are currently sponsoring a refugee family to be resettled in Ottawa, and we pray in not to distant future. This is how faith is lived out in community, this is what it means to be reckoned as righteousness.

**To the glory of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**