

“God of the Greener Pastures”

UCCP Migrant Workers Sunday: November 22, 2020

Matthew 25:31-46

Ezekiel 34:11-16

Psalm 100

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in partnership with UCCP Migrant Ministry

Tagalog is not my mother tongue. After serving as mission co-workers for about 4 ½ years here in the Philippines, Taglish is mostly what I can understand and speak. One of the first Taglish words that I learned was “greener pastures.” Before I learned that word, when I was serving as a local church pastor in the US, when I thought about greener pastures, I only thought about Psalm 23 which people often requested for their funeral service.

During these first years as a mission co-worker, I have learned quickly about “greener pastures.” Family members who worked abroad, also help to pay for food, medicine, medical care and school fees, books, and uniforms. I also know that many UCCP local churches benefited from the monies shared from relatives working or living abroad. Two years ago, during the UCCP National Council meeting in Hamtic, Antique, I stayed with a family whose daughter worked in Singapore as a special needs teacher. With certainty, I know that her family home and the church benefited greatly from her financial support.

When several UCCP colleagues asked me to prepare this BTR for UCCP Migrant Workers Sunday, I immediately looked up the Scripture passages assigned by the lectionary, in my UCCP planning calendar. I was surprised to learn that there was more imagery about sheep and green pastures. I was also excited to include the Matthew 25 Scripture passage, because the church that commissioned me as a mission co-worker, the Presbyterian Church (USA) has developed its vision for the church and society, around these same verses.

After my surprise and excitement faded away, I realized the tremendous challenge of providing a word of comfort and challenge about sheep and green pastures. This global pandemic has not only changed our daily routines, but also many of our lives. Sadly, many have already witnessed the illness and death of their loved ones because of covid-19 – and others are also still sick or ill because of the delayed medical procedures. Many are the challenges for Filipino migrants and their family members, who are separated and worrying if they can return home to the Philippines, and if they can stay healthy or even stay alive – and family members do now know how to pay for their basic needs, without the income from the family member or members who were working abroad.

UCCP Migrant Ministry partners from Migrante International and CompassPH have been sharing regular updates about the international and national situationer about migrants. Stranded seafarers in Uruguay, Sri Lanka and China, were stranded in their ships and waiting for the Philippine

government to rescue them. Cruise ship workers in California, USA and around the world, were always the last to leave their ships after working and providing for the needs of their guests. Before the pandemic, some OFWs who were working in Syria also suffered much abuse and exploitation. The ongoing civil war in Syria, plus the pandemic, made it extremely dangerous, so many OFWs waited longer to return home to the Philippines. Not everybody was stranded overseas since there were many locally stranded individuals, who were waiting to go abroad with their contracts. Many could not return to their home provinces because their flights were delayed and cancelled with short notice. They stayed under the flyover near NAIA, until they could receive extra assistance. Tens of thousands of OFWs have already returned home, and as many as and maybe even more than one million are expected to return home. Many of you know what I'm talking about because you are living through these challenging circumstances.

So when I read again Matthew 25, about how the Son of Man, that is, Jesus will judge the nations and separate them, in the same way that a shepherd separates goats from the sheep, I am wondering not to myself, but with you who are listening, "Where are we in this story?" Are we comforted? Are we challenged? Is Jesus challenging the different countries to treat people better, because Jesus will judge us according to how we treat the least of these? We can say yes to all of these questions, but here's where I would invite you to pay attention: today's Filipino migrants are facing many of these challenges because they are considered the "least of these."

In the eyes of the global economy, their host countries, and their employers, sometimes migrants are stripped of their humanity, their human dignity. They are naked. In the homes or other places of employment, some OFWs face criminal cases from their employers – but with little legal support from the Philippines or their host countries. Suddenly they are imprisoned and even worse they are executed under the death penalty. Others are already stuck in their homes and employment contracts or being sold from one to another employer. These are their prisons.

Due to COVID-19, for those migrants who can return home to the Philippines, they are waiting in quarantine facilities, they are waiting for their COVID test results, they are waiting for transportation, and this extended waiting could feel like prison. Some of those sea-based migrants who were still working and waiting for the Philippine government to rescue and repatriate them, were also thirsty and hungry. While waiting for food or water, for flights and local transportation to return to their home provinces, and for their test results, these migrants were the often the least welcome -- in port cities far away from their home, and maybe even in their home provinces, because of the fear of being a virus carrier.

When our family members are OFWs, we enjoy the greener pastures and don't hear as much about their hardships. Especially during this pandemic, when migrants are trying to return home to the Philippines, I can only imagine these extra challenges. It is already difficult to stay healthy and survive the pandemic in the Philippines. Still Matthew 25 and the pandemic reveal that these very hardships are nakedness, thirst and hunger, the unwelcome, and the imprisonment.

Still Jesus is not asking us to look at the “least of these,” in the same way as the global economy, host countries, or their employers. Although we see Jesus’ judgment about how the nations treat the most vulnerable people – but what’s harder to see is Jesus in the very conditions of the people that impact the people whom we know and love: our family members.

Despite and because of these challenges facing migrants who are our family members, let’s check our eyes of faith: Like the perfect vision for eyesight as 2020, we might wish that we had something else to look at. We wish that we could put on another pair of glasses and all would be well and go back to normal. The Matthew 25 vision helps us to see sharply through this pandemic. If we look away, we might miss Jesus. The Lord is calling anew for us to see Jesus – and look for Jesus – in those who are imprisoned, naked, thirsty, unwelcome – especially if they are the migrants suffering from this pandemic.

As our churches and other faith communities seek to accompany migrants and their families, there are specific and concrete responses as facilitated by Churches Witnessing with Migrants (CWWM) online dialogues in Visayas and being planned for Mindanao. Thanks to the hard work and efforts of Filipino colleagues, and by extension, UCCP partners, there are also localized efforts in your churches and conferences in collaboration with ecumenical relief efforts. Where have you seen Jesus when you respond in love to the needs of your neighbors and communities? Please share more of these stories with me, I would love to hear how you are responding to the needs to migrants and their families, and other vulnerable peoples from your different places.

For now, let’s listen anew to the prophet priest Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a priest who was part of the first group of Israelites exiled to Babylon. He was with the people. In that way, Ezekiel could speak directly to their experiences. Most of his words were sharp rebuke with little redemption because of the destruction against Jerusalem and the temple. According to his assessment, this destruction was not the only oppression from a foreign power – but also because of the sinfulness of God’s people and the weakness of God to stand up against foreign god Marduk. With that background, let us hear again the words from prophet Ezekiel as they turn to words of comfort and assurance.

Reading from selections of Ezekiel 34:12-15, the Lord says, “I seek out my sheep. I will rescue them... I will bring them out...I will gather them...I will bring them into their own land...I will feed them...I will make them lie down... I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed...I will bind up the injured and I will the strengthen the weak...” Can you hear the lengths that God will go to, to get you – to rescue you – to bring you back to a place of security and safety?

Like the Israelites exiled to Babylon, today’s Filipino migrants could feel like God had abandoned them – and maybe that they abandoned God during this pandemic. Still God pursues them with love and leads them towards freedom and healing. If you’re a migrant, you might understand what those Israelites felt like: you’ve lost every piece of certainty – you’ve lost faith in your God,

you've lost confidence in yourself and your abilities, you may even feel as though God has abandoned you. Through it all, God never abandoned you. Still God wants to do more than pursue you out of love and provide for your needs in greener pastures. God also pursues justice.

These last words from Ezekiel emphasize God's redemption, listen again to the whole verse 16: "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, *but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice*" (emphasis mine). This time, God as the Shepherd is doing more than going after the sheep and providing them with their needs—God is also showing us that good shepherding responsibilities hold accountable both leaders and citizens to provide for the needs of vulnerable communities.

COVID-19 has already revealed so much about our humanity and our world, in the inability to provide for the safety, security, health and well-being of people – and it's overwhelming. We are weak, vulnerable, afraid, and anxious. Still God shows us the way forward is not by meeting our own needs – but also providing for one another's needs. Yes, God gives us the green pastures of God's provisions – and yes, God is also inviting us to do more than keep God's provisions and promises to ourselves.

Many are the challenges, so I urge us to re-commit ourselves to the Shepherd God who is doing and still doing good works in those "greener pastures." The next time that you hear about God as our Shepherd, consider the challenge to remember God's faithfulness in our lives – and respond in action, for those most vulnerable, beyond our lives to the next generations.

Psalm 100 exhorts us to joyful praise in acknowledgment of God our Maker and Shepherd: How many of us really know and take to heart that God made us? And that we belong to him? Instead do we feel that we belong more to our work – our debts – and our hardships? How many of us really experience that joy of worshipping with gladness? Instead are we consumed by fear and anxiety? These challenges can overshadow the ability to see any future. I am not asking you to put on a fake smiley face. This praise cannot diminish our challenges – but this praise can remind us of God's steadfast faithfulness that strengthens our relationship with God – not only for ourselves but to pass along God's goodness onto future generations.

Especially as we commemorate Migrant Workers Sunday during this covid-19 pandemic, I am mindful and grieve over the loss of lives and livelihoods. Many are hungry and thirsty, and many are facing imprisonment and unwelcome. Instead of looking away, here is where we can look for and see Jesus. Jesus the Son of Man also judges us for not seeing those most vulnerable among our neighbors and communities. This Jesus also challenges us to consider another God of the greener pastures: not only a God who will go to great lengths to provide for our needs, but the God who challenges the greed of those who exploit and benefit directly from vulnerable people. May these words serve as both comfort and challenge for the people, to the glory of God. Amen and Amen and Amen.

Note: If you choose to use any of this text in your sermon, testimony, prayer, or other worship-related resources, please attribute to me and include my designation. The other file with complete Migrant Worker Sunday liturgy can be attributed to Rev. Annabelle Uriarte. Thank you for your kind attention.