

Texas Baptist Voices: God remains close to those searching for home

September 7, 2016

At the risk of stating the obvious, there are many strong feelings about immigration this election cycle, bringing with it fear, anger and resentment.



Myles Werntz But long before this year, our country learned to fear immigration. In 2002, immigration services were rehoused under the newly created Department of Homeland Security. Immigrants, legal or otherwise, were now overseen by the same department tasked with defending the country from terrorists. And understandably, our vision about immigrants became colored by those suspicions.

But even this was not when we as a country learned to fear immigrants. Before immigrants were categorically a security threat, we saw them as an economic threat. Through many celebrated legal channels and programs, such as the longstanding [bracero program of the 20th century](#), tens of thousands of Latino workers came into American industries. In the 19th and early 20th century, European immigrants filled the mines and

slaughterhouses, angering American nationals.

And before immigrants were named an economic threat, they were seen as a threat to American culture, bringing in new languages and ideas. Between 1882 and 1965, Asians largely were barred from immigrating to America, only able to immigrate sporadically in-between. Between 1925 and 1965, immigration numbers were crafted carefully to maintain a certain vision of American culture that would not have to consider other visions seriously.



Immigrants, in other words, always have been suspected for one reason or another.

But for Christians, this should not be, if for no other reason than immigration is intertwined with the story of Scripture. From Adam and Eve's exile from the garden to Abraham's journey out of Ur, to the Children of Israel's wandering in the wilderness after Egypt, the Old Testament speaks of a people on journey and without a home. Through exile and return, Israel continues its pilgrimage, never receiving a home to call its own for more than a few generations.

In the New Testament, we find ourselves following Jesus, cast down into Egypt as a child and cast out of his hometown as an adult. We watch as Paul and the other apostles migrate from region to region as missionaries. We stand in awe as the Holy Spirit uses travelers in Jerusalem to spread the gospel back out across the Mediterranean world. Over and over, the New Testament letters address those "scattered across the world," those who have no lasting city (Hebrews 13:4) and those who look forward to rest from their travels.

In other words, in Scripture, immigration is part of God's good dealings with the world.

But yet, in looking at America's history of immigration, it is alternately one of welcome and suspicion, of opportunity and rejection. What is needed is not, I think, another reminder that "we're all immigrants" or "everyone is from somewhere else," but a closer and clearer look at the ways in which God remains close to those whose lives are bound up in the search for home. This is the story Scripture tells of the people of God, and a story the people of God must remember as their own.

It is in wandering that the people of God became the people of God, and it is all those seeking a new home whom the people of God must reach out to today.

Myles Werntz is the T.B. Maston chair of Christian ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon Seminary.