

# On the borders of faith, freedom and the human family



## Highland Views

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Guest columnist

I was reading the troubling story of a Venezuelan family making the arduous journey to the U.S. border. Leaving the land of their birth, they walk through Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico. Swindled out of money, enduring a dangerous jungle crossing, constantly fearing robbers and rapists, drinking river water, they sustain themselves with fortitude and faith. They pray often to make it safely to a new country where they can live free of fear ... where they can simply live.

The long and treacherous journey of this family, a mother, father, children and grandmother, makes me think more deeply about the age-old human quest for freedom, a search often sustained by beliefs, in the guidance of a God, or the "human spirit." I reflect on whether I could do it, if I could make the journey undertaken by that family, or the thousands of families, as a refugee seeking someplace to call home. I'm not sure I could do that. If it was to keep my loved ones safe, and risking terribly unsafe

conditions were the only viable option, I hope I would have the strength to make that awful choice.

Broadening my thoughts on this topic of migration, seeking refuge, desperate journeys, I have serious questions for those intent on placing even more obstacles in the way, those who have the power to make it even more difficult for displaced persons to reach safe ground. Those who think primarily of their own freedom and safety, who believe in strict policies and secure walls built on the firm foundation of their own (politicized) faith, are playing a cruel god-game with real human lives. They wish to protect their own "sacred land," specially chosen for them, blessed by their God who shines His grace from sea to sea, secure border to border. These proud citizens have closed the door and locked it behind them, deaf to the "huddled masses yearning to be free" (apparently forgetting that they, or their ancestors only a few generations ago, were migrating seekers themselves). No one seriously wants "open borders," yet, as cellist Pablo Casals once said: "Love of one's country is wonderful, but why should love stop at the border?" Is there a wall or fence or mentality so solid to stop love – basic humanity?

With a background in biblical studies, I wonder how the people who build

fences with their faith and borders with their beliefs, can honestly explain their views in light of central stories of their own sacred scriptures. Abraham was "a wandering Aramean," part of a nomadic culture, leading his family and flocks from place to place, searching for sustainable land. The Hebrews were slaves in the land of Egypt, led to liberation by an Egyptian prince named Moses, making the uncertain migration through lands inhabited by many cultures, following the promise of a better, more stable life – a place to put down roots. The people of Israel suffered in exile for a long time before they could return to their homeland in Palestine. The young immigrant family with an infant son was forced to flee the terror of a paranoid king, reversing the Exodus to return to Egypt. We could round out the biblical narrative of displacement, spotlighting the struggle endured by the early persecuted Christian community who placed their hopes in a new promised land. Their pilgrimage was fraught with fearfulness and finality.

The question for those who fear the ones seeking refuge, standing their ground to "guard the gates" against believers following the star to the light on the hill, is simple: Why have you exiled your own Bible and fled your faith?

A thought came to mind in a conver-

sation I had with someone after a lecture: Since it is quite possible the vast majority of asylum seekers coming to American borders are Christians, what if they were in a religious procession (rather than characterized as a criminal mob in "caravans," like some horde of barbarians), perhaps led by priests and ministers? What if news reports focused on migrant families praying at the border, testifying to their reasons for fleeing their homes, and the way sincerely-held faith guides their journey? What if their migration was expressed in no uncertain terms as a forced but faithful pilgrimage, a modern day equivalent in every way to the Exodus from Egypt, the Escape from Exile and the Holy Family's entry and exit from Egypt? How would the "followers of Jesus" respond, those who call for walls and preach for protection from the "invaders" they fear are "replacing" good white Christians?

It seems that many who claim to "believe in the Bible" neither read it or take to heart these fundamental scriptural stories.

*Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" ([chighland.com](http://chighland.com)).*