

14 Days of Nation-Building
Part 2
Third Rail? Immigration, Us, and the U.S.

Welcome to Day 2 of “14 Days of Nation-Building”, a too loftily titled attempt to think through what it means to be a nation and citizen, guided by the Bible.

I'm David Rowe, Co-pastor of the Greenfield Hill Congregational Church of Fairfield, Connecticut. Today's episode is “Third Rail? Immigration, Us, and the U.S.”

Day 1 was about the mere fact of governance. Other than the occasional anarchist who may stumble across my writings, the rest of us expect to be governed, need to be governed, may even want to be governed.

A favorite cartoon has a sort of Tweety-bird character hanging precipitously off the edge of a cliff, certain to fall. Another animal character comes along, looks at the unfolding tragedy, and declares, “Somebody oughta do something about that.”

As the world evolved in complexity, the “somebody” who “oughta do something” is the government. We can smile at the famous quotes like, “the government is not the solution; The government is the problem”; or “the nine most frightening words are ‘we are from the government, and we're here to help’.”

We can smile until we face something that cannot be done by goodwill or good wishes or good neighbors alone. In a nation that reveres our soldiers and all the first responders of police, fire, and emergency workers, do we need reminding that they are government workers? Maybe a little less sloganeering, and a little more reality checking will inspire greater expectations of all that builds a nation and a citizen.

Today... how did we get here? There are lots of levels to that question and answer. Some of us got here in chains, some by breaking chains. Some with optimism, some in fear. Some with people awaiting them, some with no one. Yet our forebearers got here, and here we still are.

Early in the Bible, God says to Abraham, “Get thee to a far country... I will make of you a great nation... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:1-3).

Once upon a time, long, long ago, in a land far, far away... Thus begin histories, legends, myths, origins stories. If we are looking at Nation-Building/USA/2025, let's start in reverse. Our nation's origins, whether 1775/76, 1620, or 1607, are mostly Christian and European. Europe got its Christianity and much of its national identities from the growth and splintering and spread of Christianity. That Christianity first spread from Israel, its roots firmly embedded in Judaism and Israel. They were the result of prophets like Isaiah, kings like David, judges like

Deborah, liberators and lawgivers like Moses, patriarchs like Jacob and Isaac. And Abraham: founder, explorer, visionary, pilgrim, immigrant.

“Get thee to a far country,” God told Abraham (Genesis 12:1), launching what Americans think of as “the Great Experiment”, and what old Abraham (and God!) called “The Covenant”.

You emigrate from where you leave; You immigrate to where you land. I heard once, “Immigrants/emigrants choose to go, looking for some better result, a happy ending. Exiles are kicked out. Refugees are fleeing – both hoping to return.”

In terms of USA experience, those immigrants of the 1600s – 1900s came here to build a new life, leaving behind the old world. They were here to stay as a matter of preference. They were forward-looking and future looking. This America is what they looked forward to, and the USA was their future.

Exiles don't want to leave home, but most often are pushed out by political headwinds aligned against them. They hope the headwinds change to their advantage, steering them back home. The first generation of Cubans, escaping Fidel Castro and landing in Florida, overtly plotted their return to Cuba. In recent years, people have arrived from Nicaragua, the Balkans, Ukraine, Venezuela, and Iran carrying with them the unquenchable desire to return home. Exiles.

Refugees are inevitably fleeing insurmountable horrors: war, famine, persecution, pestilence. Every risk is worth it, compared to what they were facing in their homeland. America was not their dream. But the nightmare they fled turned anywhere else into a haven, if not heaven.

And what of slaves, whose arrival is surely that most broken hearted of all? The evil that embraced slavery, that funded it, profited from it, is an intolerable stain that makes us look hard at our founding promises and American dreams. Yet their descendants stand fully and hopefully and prayerfully alongside all our arrivals.

People leave for various reasons. People arrive under various conditions. It is America's story. It is Israel's story.

Abraham was an emigrant from Ur, ancient Iraq! He spent the rest of his life as a nomad, stateless until his descendants landed in “The Promised Land”, 600 years later. Along the way, the Jewish people became refugees from famine, slaves in Egypt, homeless in hostile territory, before finally becoming immigrants and conquerors in the variously known Canaan, Israel, Palestine, Promised Land.

Migration is central to Israel's nation building story. The Biblical Naomi escaped famine in Israel to become a refugee in Moab. Later, her foreign/alien daughter-in-law, Ruth, emigrates to Israel with Naomi and becomes the multi generation ancestor of – *ta da!* – Jesus. Who, by the way, starts life with his parents as refugees in Egypt, after escaping political terror.

Now, let's reverse the reverse. Jesus begins a movement that spawns a religion, that spreads to Europe, that divides and conquers, that flees to America, that breaks from England, and establishes these United States: a land of immigrants, refugees, exiles, all those “huddled masses, yearning to be free” from slavery, persecution, poverty, war, and evil.

That's the “us” part of being the USA. It is our story: our heritage. Quite literally, our DNA.

By hook or by crook we got here. For good or ill we settled here. Now, all these years after the Pilgrims on Cape Cod in 1620, and John Smith in Virginia in 1607, and Ponce de Leon in Florida, and Leif Erikson somewhere up north, a key hot topic of governance is who gets to come here, study here, stay here? Who is welcome? Who gets to become us?

If I picked one word as vital to this series, it would be “Humility.” Granted, it has been my guiding light all my life. It was driven into me as a kid, a student, an athlete. It is how I have coached, taught, and pastored. It drives my writing, teaching, and preaching: Humility. I believe we should approach everything we need to do and say with humility. In my Memorial Day sermon, I said that God's oft repeated command to Israel to “do not forget... remember” means to know where you came from, how you got here and why, who helped you along the way, what principles and virtues and ideas carried you along. Such reflecting keeps us humble as we begin our Biblical look at building a nation.