It was June 1967. My family lived in Aleppo, Syria. The six day war between Israel and some of the Arab states had just begun. In the middle of the night my parents awakened us the children, put us in the car along with a few necessary items and drove us downtown to a relative's home for refuge.

At the time we lived on the campus of Aleppo College, situated at the outskirts of the city. The College was started by congregational missionaries from the US and many of its staff persons were Americans who, that night, had to leave the country and flee their Syrian homes. I cannot remember many details but I remember that for six days we could not go home. We weren't even sure there would be a home left after the violence and vandalism. This experience of fleeing and finding refuge I have experienced several times in my life, when the immediacy of the situation demanded a move.

My grandparents too had experienced exile and fleeing years before during the Armenian Genocide by the flailing Ottoman Empire around 1915. A million and a half died. Thousands were ordered on a death march having to flee their homes, eventually becoming refugees in states that would receive them. My grandparents ended up in Syria, in a refugee camp. So when I read about Jesus' persecution by Herod, and Joseph's response to the situation, I think of the immediacy of the situation all refugees and displaced persons experience. They may never be able to return. They are uprooted.

According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus as a baby was a refugee also. While the family was still in Bethlehem, an angel warned Joseph not to return home to Nazareth but flee from King Herod's wrath to take refuge in another country. Joseph immediately did as the angel instructed, turning Baby Jesus into a refugee, a vulnerable resident alien, a displaced person, an asylum seeker during the first year of his life.

It is striking how the experiences of refugees today are so similar to Jesus'. There are around 31 million refugees around the world today, the definition of which includes – refugees, asylum-seekers, returnees, internally displaced persons, stateless persons. There are persons who have no passports, no legal identity. And there are many, like me, who even in the places of their birth are foreigners and minorities.

Interestingly, humans from the beginning have been nomadic. They have moved from one place to another to find habitable places. Perhaps that is why even during Bible times there were categories for refugees and sojourners, resident aliens and foreigners, strangers and outsiders. Although the Bible was written by a tribal people, the Hebrews, and as such it is one peoples' story, it admonishes all to treat one another with justice and compassion, as "for both the native among the Israelites and the alien residing among them—you shall have the same law." Lev. 19: 10

Today when we look at how we treat those who cross our borders because of political, religious persecution or hardships; those who seek asylum and refuge; those who simply seek a better life, we can remember how closely they resemble the family of Jesus. When we look at how we treat the foreigner and the stateless, how we detain and apprehend them, we need to remember that Jesus himself was an asylum seeker, representing all the asylum seekers, the detainees, and the displaced of the world. Jesus' story is our story.

Join us this Sunday for a prayer vigil to remember the humanity of all those who are often seen as only labels. Come to remember that each human is a dear child of God, an abode of Jesus who lives within each one's heart. Come to remember that our ministry to the displaced and detained is a response to the injustices they suffer. ***Come to remember that Jesus is the Light of the world, that the light shines in darkness, and darkness has not overcome it!***

Rev. Nayiri Karjian, Transitional Conference Minster
Florida Conference United Church of Christ | October 2, 2025