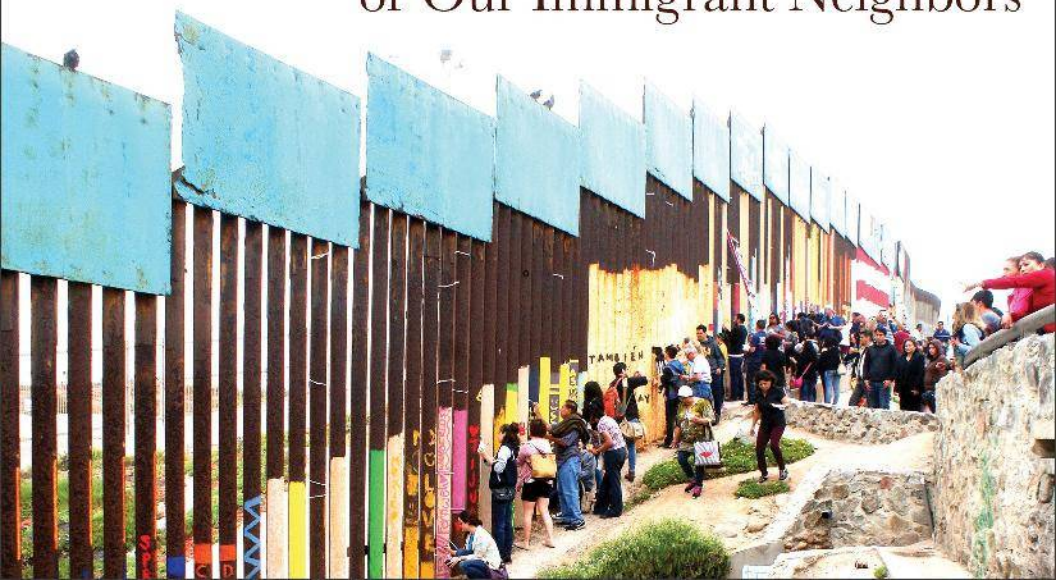


Julia Lambert Fogg

# FINDING JESUS AT THE BORDER

Opening Our Hearts to the Stories  
of Our Immigrant Neighbors



# FINDING JESUS AT THE BORDER

Opening Our Hearts to the Stories  
of Our Immigrant Neighbors

Julia Lambert Fogg



**BrazosPress**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

# Contents

Acknowledgments 9

1. Walk This Way: Approaching the Border 11
2. Fleeing without Papers: Matthew 2:1–23 27
3. Vantage Points and Borders—Where We Stand  
Shapes How We See: Mark 12:41–44 45
4. Challenging Border Wall Mentalities: Ruth and  
Mark 7:24–30 69
5. Letters from Behind Prison Walls: Philippians  
1:12–30 93
6. Seeking Asylum at the US Border: Philippians  
2:5–11 119
7. Standing before ICE: John 11:1–34 141
8. Where Do We Go from Here? Border Crossing  
as Praxis: John 1:1–5, 14 169

For Further Reading 181

Notes 185

# 1

## Walk This Way: Approaching the Border

### **My Story**

I am a fifteenth-generation East Coast American of mixed European and Anglo descent. My ancestors crossed the ocean—and many other barriers, borders, and boundaries going back to the time of William Penn—to come to these shores.<sup>1</sup> But most of those stories of journey and arrival are lost to my generation. We didn't personally cross those borders, and neither did our parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents. Immigrant consciousness disappeared from my family's sense of identity generations ago. Our European ancestors planted their roots firmly in the East Coast soil through deaths and burials, births and baptisms, farming, building, ranching, mining, and yes, serving in political office and as lawyers, educators, engineers, and artists.

Although my own generation was not aware of our immigrant status, I was aware of the presence of more recent arrivals in my hometown. For example, the mushroom workers in

Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, came as immigrant farm workers. As they followed the crops from south to north up the Eastern seaboard, many of these farm workers planted themselves in Pennsylvania soil, settled, and became our neighbors. Others kept moving through the towns around us, following the seasonal work and harvest times. But our new neighbors were invisible to us. We rarely met, and our lives seldom connected. The children of these immigrants weren't in the same public school with me or my brother; their moms didn't shop in the grocery stores we frequented. I had little awareness of national borders, but there were plenty of local borders in the mostly white, semi-rural, suburban regions of southeastern Pennsylvania.

We were more aware of another immigrant group who also farmed for a living, the Pennsylvania Dutch and Amish who lived down the road. We bought fresh corn, string beans, and tomatoes from them. But they weren't new immigrants, and they owned or leased their farmland. Their families had also been in the area for generations. My great-great-grandmother grew from their roots. In middle school, I met some first- and second-generation German, English, Italian, and Irish immigrant children. We all developed the same local American accent, but our names were different. I had no sense of where their families had come from, or which borders their parents had crossed to get here. I do remember that my mother was sad when my friend Tommy's family emigrated to Pakistan. I learned the names of places people left our area *for*, but not the names of the places my friends' parents had come *from*.

Although I grew up regularly going to Sunday school and learning Bible stories on old-school felt boards, I never heard those sacred stories as narratives of border crossing. Instead, what I knew of border crossing came from aunts, uncles, and cousins talking about their time in the Peace Corps or the American Friends Service. I knew their stories, like Tommy's,

of crossing borders to live abroad, to teach or to serve, and then to return home.

When it was my turn to go abroad, I found crossing borders to be relatively easy. I studied in Mexico, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. I traveled to Venezuela, Columbia, and Ecuador. I lived in Spain for a few years—I was even, technically speaking, undocumented there for a time. I rarely worried about it. It seemed easy enough to take the train from Madrid to Lisbon (long before country borders dissolved into the European Union), spend the day, and get another short-term tourist visa stamped into my passport on the way back. I never thought twice about returning to the US, as so many international students must today. This was before September 11, 2001. I had an American passport, white skin, and an excellent education. I dressed in a traditionally feminine way, and I was comfortable traveling alone. I rarely drew a second look.

My sense of borders and belonging changed after I moved from the East Coast to California. In Los Angeles, it seemed like everyone I met was a first- or second-generation arrival. In the San Fernando Valley, every other household spoke a different language. Everyone had a unique story of how they arrived, where they came from, and why they wanted or needed to leave where they had been. Living among so many immigrants, I constructed my own story of migration. It went like this: I left home in 2003 and came to California to teach religion in a small, private, liberal arts university. At first, everything smelled different. The desert air was different—lighter, drier, with subtle shades of toasted caramel, creosote, and sage. I missed the thick, heavy atmosphere before a rainstorm in Pennsylvania, electric with lightning and ear-splitting thunder that resolved into clean, clear air after it passed.

Aside from the weather, culture shock hit me in random ways. Southern Californians never stopped smiling. The ocean was on the wrong side. No one knew how to drive in the rain,

so the lightest spritz caused accidents. Drivers piled onto “free-ways” that stole hours of time from each week. The most baffling cultural shift for an East Coaster, though, was not the language but the dress codes. There weren’t any. People wore whatever clothes they wanted to, to any event they attended, and never felt over-, under-, or improperly (as my grandmother would say) dressed. Shorts and flip-flops, or a dress and heels? All were welcome. But the adjustments I made only skimmed the surface of the kinds of cultural and social adjustments people must make when coming from another country altogether.

### ***Encountering Borders inside Southern California***

A few years into my teaching career, when the ocean was still on the wrong side, the bishop’s office of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) called and asked if I spoke Spanish. I said yes. Was I also ordained to preside at Communion? I said yes. The bishop’s official asked if I was available to preach and preside that Sunday at a Lutheran church in Pasadena. Could I lead two services, one in English and one in Spanish? I actually had never preached in Spanish (except for that one time when I was sixteen and I gave a short, extemporaneous homily, “Dios es amor” [“God is love”], on the border in Mexico during a mission trip), nor had I led a Lutheran liturgy, let alone a Lutheran liturgy in Spanish. I said yes. And with that one phone call, I quickly stepped across three borders—religious, cultural, and liturgical. That Sunday gig turned into five years of part-time bilingual ministry. I fell in love with the immigrant families of the Scandinavian-Latinx congregation I served, and they transformed me.

I write this book to share my experience of crossing borders and the transformations that come when we step out of our comfort zones to meet people, however awkwardly, in their

religious, cultural, and linguistic homes.<sup>2</sup> To this end, I set biblical stories of border crossing, migration, and detention in conversation with contemporary stories of border crossing, migration, and detention. This work is personal and theological and, necessarily, political.

During his presidency, Barack Obama increased the deportation of undocumented immigrants who had committed crimes. And in 2012 Obama's administration also provided an avenue for the temporary suspension of deportation procedures for undocumented young people brought to the US as children. This program, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), stabilized the lives of many youth so that they could work, drive, and normalize their lives. In 2017, Donald Trump's administration attempted to cancel DACA, throwing the lives of almost 700,000 DACA recipients into ambiguity and turmoil.<sup>3</sup> The question of whether the DACA program will continue or be canceled now stands with the Supreme Court.<sup>4</sup>

In 2014, and again in the summer of 2018, tides of children from Latin America flooded the US-Mexico border. Some of the children were as young as six, accompanied by an adolescent or teenage sibling. The children sought one or both parents. Now, under the Trump presidency, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents are working hard to clear the books—that is, to deport as many undocumented immigrants as possible and to clear out overcrowded detention centers and courtroom caseloads that would otherwise be backed up for years to come. President Trump has also canceled protections for Salvadorans, Haitians, and immigrants of other nationalities who have been living legally in the US. When these protections are removed, those who sought and received legal residence in the US after natural disasters destroyed their home economies will find themselves among the undocumented eligible for forced removal. To add insult to injury, the Trump administration is battling child advocates who demand an end



to and reparations for the policy of separating children of all ages from their parents at our borders. Most of these families have committed no crimes; they are simply exercising their right under US law to seek asylum at our border. For these reasons, it is increasingly urgent that we hear contemporary stories of immigration, migration, border crossing, and detention in conversation with biblical stories of border crossing.

### ***Working as a Pastor***

I learned about this urgency when I was invited to substitute preach at and then to copastor an immigrant church every second or third Sunday over the course of five years. I was part of a small team of part-time, bilingual, and mostly female pastors. To make this arrangement work, the congregation embraced more voluntary lay leadership and self-governance as a way to keep their church open and on its feet until they could afford a full-time pastor. The congregation was small but dedicated. They were also a very culturally complex group of people. The first service was in English, with a beloved Finnish or Norwegian hymn for special occasions, and drew second-, third-, and fourth-generation Scandinavian immigrant families. The second service was in Spanish and drew first-, second-, third-, and fourth-generation members of immigrant Latino families of Peruvian, Mexican, Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Honduran, Nicaraguan, and Chilean descent. Ours was a quintessential immigrant church.

The church held services every Sunday, with occasional baptisms and quinceañeras on Saturdays. A few adults celebrated their First Communion with us. But there was no longer an acolyte program, as there had been a generation ago. Instead, at Sunday services I invited the youngest children up to light the candles and drew their siblings in to collect the offering. They were shy, but excited to participate. We tried to involve everyone

in the worship experience. The Lutheran liturgy was beautiful and rhythmic, and it followed a certain informal character—a little bit Latin American and a little bit Scandinavian. The lay worship leaders were an eclectic bunch. Some had graduate degrees from Yale University, others had a fourth-grade education from rural Central American schools. Our pianist was an African American jazz musician who often stayed after Sunday services to give free group piano lessons to the children. The congregational president was a twentysomething bilingual college student whose family was originally from Mexico. Then there was me—the red-headed female professor in a black Presbyterian robe following a Lutheran liturgy. I liked the eclectic mix. Every face reminded us of the four corners of God’s earth, gathered together under one roof to sing praises and offer thanksgiving.

The governance of the church followed ELCA protocols, but in worship, denominational boundaries were more fluid. Sometimes I heard private confession from individual church members who had been raised Catholic. They felt they could not receive the Eucharist until they had spoken with me in confession. I adapted house-blessing liturgies for young families who wanted to banish the evil spirits that lurked in their home and frightened their children. I laid healing hands on aching body parts and infections that wouldn’t heal; I prayed over deep childhood pains that still festered but were never reported to the authorities. I explained the Trinity—or tried to; I translated intimate conversations between mothers and teenage daughters who didn’t speak the same language. As a congregation, we wept with a mother whose son had been deported twenty-four hours after his arrest, and we encouraged each other when members lost their jobs or struggled to feed their children on one income. We listened to grandparents’ stories and celebrated parents’ hopes and dreams for their American children.

People usually frequented one service or the other according to their language preference and habit. But there were some exceptions. Young people who attended the Spanish service with their parents only understood about half of the liturgy. They were really coming for the cultural connection to their family's heritage. Those who attended the English service came for their friendships and loyalties to the founding families—their parents or grandparents. But occasionally the children's choir would sing at both services, and Angel, a Spanish speaker, would attend the English service to get an early start on his workday. I couldn't help noticing the irony that, even as we proclaimed the one body of Christ on Sunday morning, our two services seemed divided.

### **Jesus's Stories Merge and Emerge in Our Immigrant Stories**

After my own initial leap across the denominational and linguistic borders, the transformations I experienced in the church came more slowly and profoundly. I noticed that my language changed from “your congregation” to “our congregation.” I became part of the community, and they became part of me and my thinking and moving in the world. I carried them with me, as my seminary professors had taught me, seeing the world through their questions and perspectives, joys and loves and losses. Then, as I prepared sermons each week for our congregation, I also began to hear the biblical stories I was preaching in new ways. Not all at once, in a single moment of revelation or insight, but slowly. The first thing I noticed was how often Jesus crossed geographical borders to heal people in the Gospels. Then I began to see all the different social boundaries Jesus crossed just to be with people, to eat with them and teach them.

At the same time, the social, linguistic, and cultural borders in our congregation became more obvious to me. The stories of Jesus standing at borders and crossing them stood out against

the incongruous—to my thinking—congregational borders people fought to maintain. Before my eyes, the two settings—Jesus in the first-century world, and Jesus in our twenty-first-century, multilingual Southern California world—merged, danced, and mutually revealed insights across the historical distance. I saw parallel stories, the chance meetings of old and new ideas, the exchange of information, shared cultural perspectives, and moments that required repeated translation. All birthed new perspectives. As I swam between the two contexts, the immigrant congregation surrounded my sermon preparation like a cloud of witnesses. On Sunday mornings, I strove to describe the scriptural portals I saw opening up so the congregation could step into the first-century biblical world, walk with Jesus, and return renewed, walking back across that temporal border with ease.

The more I listened, the more the congregational stories echoed biblical stories. I knew Rosa, a woman with mysterious wounds: a fractured hand, a twisted ankle, a swollen knee, a bump on her forehead. The doctors couldn't explain her injuries, just as the experts in Jesus's day could find no reason for another woman's "flow of blood" (Mark 5:25–29). Rosa had been suffering for years, but one morning she caught my elbow and her story poured out of her right there in the sanctuary two minutes before services were to begin. Like the unnamed biblical woman with the flow of blood, Rosa knew the shame and social alienation of a constant, secret pain. Her ailment was not an internal hemorrhage but a husband who abused her. She had borne the abuse, and even "dragged" (his word) her husband to church with her to wash his sins away. On that Sunday, he left her. Rosa arrived at church alone and overwhelmed. Her abuser was gone, but she had no means of supporting herself. She had lost everything. As in the biblical story, there were no physicians with all of the skills needed to address Rosa's ailments; she needed psychiatric attention, legal

services, social services, and employment and housing services. Jesus was her only hope. So, she came to the Eucharist, where she reached out and “touched [Jesus’s] cloak” (Mark 5:27).

Almost two thousand years ago, long before I experienced this integrating kind of double vision that merged my congregation’s stories with Jesus’s stories, Matthew wrote his Gospel to merge the ancient saving stories of the Jewish Scriptures with the contemporary, first-century saving stories of Jesus’s ministry. The first chapters of Matthew’s Gospel open with a reimagining of the exodus: the Jews’ suffering oppression and death under a foreign king (Exod. 1:8–14; see Matt. 2:13–15), their subsequent journey out of slavery in Egypt (Exod. 12:37–42; see Matt. 2:15, 19–23), and their wandering in the desert before reaching God’s promised land (Exod. 6:1–9).

This was an important story for first-century Jews living under the Roman Empire’s oppression. Matthew retells this exodus story through the life of one humble Jewish family (Matt. 1:18–25).<sup>5</sup> Joseph, Mary, and Jesus flee to Egypt seeking refuge from King Herod, who kills a generation of children in and around Bethlehem (Matt. 2:16–18). Herod’s “massacre of the innocents” recalls the systematic killing of the Jewish male infants in Egypt as well as God’s retribution on Egypt’s firstborn (Exod. 1:1–22; 12:12). The child Jesus and his family take refuge in Egypt (Matt. 2:13–15), the home of his Israelite ancestors under Pharaoh (Exod. 1:5–9). Although Matthew doesn’t describe Jesus’s childhood, the boy lives there until Herod’s death, when God calls the family out of Egypt (Matt. 2:19–22; see Exod. 3:7–10). They follow the ancient Israelites’ journey north, eventually settling in Galilee. By interweaving the two narrative arcs—Jesus’s migration with his family and the Israelite migration out of Egypt—Matthew shows that Jesus represents more than one individual’s story (Matt. 2:15).<sup>6</sup> After Jesus makes the rough journey south to escape oppression and death threats from one king, he also goes north, crossing

the same borders his ancestors did when they left the violence, slavery, and oppression of Egypt.

The narrative arc Matthew develops (flight from Bethlehem under Herod recalls flight from Egypt under Pharaoh) continues today. Families are fleeing Salvadoran towns run by the MS-13. Others have fled Tijuana, which is run by the Sinaloa cartel. And families will continue to flee unsafe, oppressive situations to find safety and opportunity for themselves and their children. Setting out on a journey to find another place to raise a family and earn a living is the same arc many in our congregation followed. I saw parallels to Jesus's childhood in the lives of the undocumented teenagers and middle-schoolers in our congregation, children who didn't belong to the US or to Mexico. Some young parishioners got into trouble with the law, like Moses (Exod. 2:11–15), and fled, leaving their parents behind. Listening to congregants' stories in tandem with Matthew's reimagined exodus story, I understood the life of Jesus in new ways. I saw whole passages of Scripture differently when I set them side by side with the experiences of people in our congregation. I found that Jesus's life encompassed, echoed, and dignified the congregation's own stories. The more I prepared my sermons with and for these American immigrants of multiple generations, the more clearly I saw the deep connections between the ancient biblical narratives and the contemporary, lived experiences of God's people in Southern California.

### **Why Should We Listen to the Stories of Undocumented Migrants?**

The Bible is and has been an important resource for immigrants, migrants, and border crossers. The general secretary of the World Council of Churches once called the Bible “the ultimate immigration handbook,”<sup>7</sup> and the name has stuck. When we read Scripture as an immigration handbook, we hear the stories

differently. This means we can't sit back in our home pews or classrooms or recline in our climate-controlled offices and expect the Scriptures to open up and sing for us. The Scriptures will not begin conversing with our present-day contexts without our engaged effort. Interpretation takes work. It requires us to be present at the borders of time, culture, and circumstances. It requires stepping out of our own neighborhoods and out of our own comfort zones. It requires engaging our neighbors at a deeper level so that we can hear and open our hearts to their stories.

This book argues that to hear the border narratives in our Scriptures we must listen to the stories of those who cross borders and those who live at the border of belonging: the immigrants, the undocumented, the asylum seekers, children separated from their families.<sup>8</sup> With this book I invite you to make that effort. I invite you to really listen to your neighbors' stories, to wrestle with their experiences as undocumented people, and to imagine what it's like to walk in their shoes, navigating the public school system, the emergency room, a courtroom, or an insurance claims office. I invite you to ask what it's like seeking help from a local congregation instead of giving it, receiving charity rather than making an offering, figuring out the tax system, seeking worker's disability, or understanding tenant rights. Transformation begins here: listening to our neighbors' stories. Along the way we will meet neighbors we may not have even known we had.

A few things are important to establish before we begin. This book does not seek to illuminate the complicated nexus of immigration law and policy in the US. I am not a lawyer, policy writer, or even an immigration expert. This book is about us as Americans, as compassionate people of faith who are committed to Jesus's command to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). Each chapter offers a deep reading of a Gospel narrative or Pauline letter<sup>9</sup> in conversation with the narratives

of specific people who have immigrated to California. I have chosen the stories of these families because they are the people I know, and their testimonies have challenged and changed me. I have also chosen these stories because they are both unique and representative of what many immigrants experience. Most of the people whose voices I lift up here are the parishioners and neighbors with whom I have celebrated, worshiped, and prayed. We have shared in memorial services, court hearings, baptisms, quinceañeras, ESL classes, Bible studies, graduation celebrations, marriages, First Communion, “know your rights” workshops, weekly meals, and youth programs. In short, we have been Christians side by side. In the final chapters, I also lift up the voices and experiences of people whom I don’t know well, and of one whom I haven’t met in person. This book is one way to begin fulfilling my commitment to them all—to share their stories and lift up their voices across the borders we Americans construct out of our cultures, races, ethnicities, languages, politics, and social classes. This work is a lived theological commitment briefly explored in a series of biblical studies. I believe that listening to ancient border crossers and contemporary border crossers reveals God at work in peoples’ lives in exciting and transformative ways.

The aim of this book is to help readers understand the experience of migration and border crossing through the eyes of the people crossing those borders. Crossing borders is not just something Jesus did—it is something all people of faith are called to do. We must cultivate and deepen our empathy for the person who, like Jesus, “has nowhere to lay [their] head” (Matt. 8:20). From here it can be a short step to following Christ alongside and even across new borders—whether physical, emotional, ethnic, racial, political, social, or geographical. When we practice intentionally crossing borders to follow in Jesus’s footsteps, we strengthen our Christian vocation and deepen our commitment to serve the body of Christ incarnate



in this world. When we listen to brothers and sisters in Christ tell their stories of crossing borders to seek asylum, to find economic opportunity, or to pursue the American dream, we hear Jesus’s voice embodied now in their experiences.

### **What Can We Do? What Must We Do?**

The flood of child immigrants from Central America and Mexico—coming with and without parents—increased and reached a crisis point in the summer of 2018. The situation is, however, far from resolved today. How the church responds will depend on three things:

1. A broad exploration of the Scriptures that speak of border crossing, offering shelter, and loving our neighbors
2. An extended encounter with undocumented individuals and mixed-status families whose lives are forever changed by border crossing
3. A growing theological understanding that crossing borders is part of our call as Christians because we follow the incarnate Word, who crossed the greatest border of all—that between the Creator and the created—to walk with us

Addressing the problem of our indifferent Christian responses to the plight of immigrants within our borders and those arriving at our borders is an opportunity for renewing our churches and deepening our discipleship. On the one hand, mainline congregations in the US are suffering deep existential anxiety as their membership numbers diminish. On the other hand, evangelical congregations have been losing members much more slowly. This means that evangelicals have more influence relative to Protestants and Catholics.<sup>10</sup>

In the midst of these demographic trends, many Christians and Christian groups are in a process of transformation.<sup>11</sup> Congregations who, out of fear of one kind or another, are circling their wagons around shared identities—homogenizing into their own ethnic, political, linguistic, or social class enclaves—will be left behind. The paths toward a future church in America lie across and outside our self-imposed and fear-driven “borders.”

For example, many churches, like the Lutheran churches I have served in Southern California, were built by immigrants fifty or one hundred or more years ago. But today these gorgeous church buildings—campuses, really—are almost empty. The elders, members of sessions, and councils are in their seventies and eighties, exhausted and crushed by the sense that their generation has failed to keep the church going. They see very little hope in revitalizing their congregations, whether because the demographics of the neighborhood have shifted around them, or because all of their children and grandchildren are, of necessity, more mobile. They leave for school, jobs, or quality of life opportunities elsewhere (just as our neighbors south of the border are doing). What was originally a church established by Scandinavian immigrants to centralize their social lives and support their cultural heritage has become a space the next generations can no longer maintain. What we have not seen, what we must develop the eyes to see, are the new waves of immigrants living our grandparents’ dream all around us in the vibrant working-class immigrant families in our neighborhoods. Understanding immigration and the immigrant experience is critical to the life of US churches.

Congregations have a chance to engage the world when they reread Scripture through an experiential hermeneutic of border crossing. This hermeneutic opens us to the voices of our immigrant and undocumented neighbors. Such voices of courage can kick-start our imaginations and draw us out of ourselves

to follow a border-crossing Christ. Through careful biblical exegesis, this project explores the ways in which the lives of believers are intertwined with the experience of both biblical and contemporary border crossing. Whether it is standing on the streets in Washington, DC, or walking the strawberry fields in Oxnard, California, Christ calls us to live in the borderlands of church and sidewalk; of country and nation; of belief and secularism; of Catholicism, Protestantism, and evangelicalism; of first-, second-, and third-generation Americans; and in the invisible borderlands of neighbors sharing the same city streets. Living in these borderlands and learning to cross these borders as a regular ethical and spiritual practice of faith will recommit our congregations to the deep social, political, and economic need for social justice in our school systems and our communities. Such ministry to immigrants who have—like Christ and with Christ—crossed borders revitalizes, reconfigures, and may even save our congregational life and outreach.