

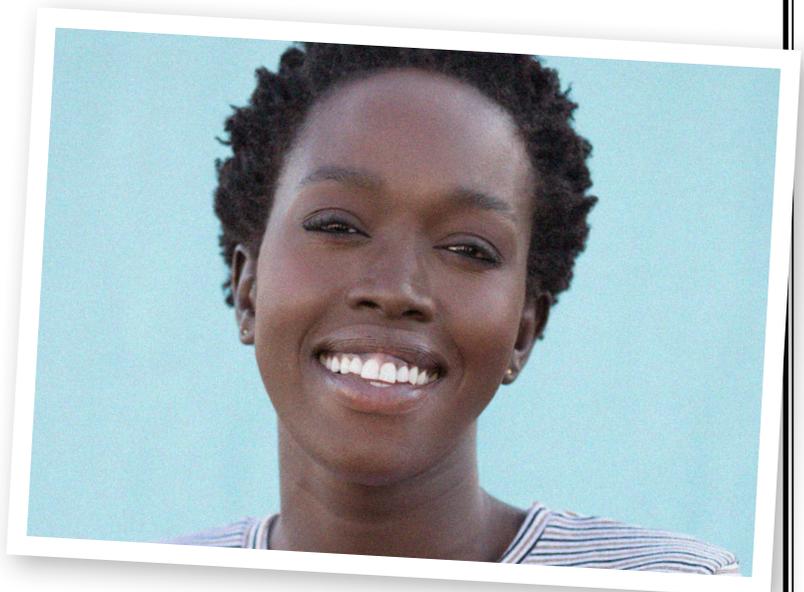


Lutheran Immigration
and Refugee Service

REFUGEE SUNDAY

Kuoth's Story

*"This country thrives when its citizens
make an effort to welcome."*



RESOURCES NEEDED

- Bible
- Map of Africa
- Picture of Kuoth
- Poster paper to write answers

SCRIPTURE READING

Your statutes have been my songs wherever I make my home.
- Psalm 119:54 (NRSV)

If more time allows read the full scripture text: Psalm 119:49 - 58

FORMER REFUGEE STORY - KUOTH

My name is Kuoth. I remember my life in Sudan as being beautiful. I had great friends in Nasir, a town in the Upper Nile in South Sudan. My father was often the only doctor in town and I remember him treating patients in our compound and I loved being at the hospital and talking with people. However when war reached us we did not have time to think and evaluate. I remember hearing gunshots in the distance and my whole family split in a matter of seconds. I did not take anything with me, not even food. Most of the people who left that day I have yet to see again.

If I had the choice I would have never left home, but there was not even time for discussion. I was displaced with a group of kids and was separated from my mother. At first my father led us, but eventually we had to split up due to the security risk of traveling with a man.

The scariest part for me was not knowing where my mom and dad were. I did not care about the violence around me I just wanted to know that everything would be fine after the ordeal. The oldest in our group was my older cousin and he was only eight years old at the time, but we were very resourceful children and, as a group, we learned to manage the situations. I ended up at an army basecamp where, luckily, my uncle was an officer. He reunited me with my aunt who gave me shelter until my mother arrived. After I found my mother and brother, we made our way to neighboring Ethiopia again.

Living in Ethiopia was not easy due to the fact that we were seen as outsiders. We went to a separate school, lived in a segregated neighborhood, and dealt with life knowing it was not my country. I had been born in



Ethiopia, but was a refugee. Therefore, I was not a Sudanese citizen or an Ethiopian citizen - I was stateless. It was not an easy life, but it had to be lived and I could feel the consistent optimism that life was going to get better.

I moved back and forth between South Sudan and Ethiopia about three times before immigrating to the US. Very often we moved due to war and unrest, and we traveled for days, if not weeks, walking by foot to get from one country to the next.

When we found out that we would be resettled to the United States, we learned that my brother had come to the US as a Lost Boy. There was so much joy because we did not even know he was alive. We also faced many difficulties during our processing and security and health assessments to come to the US, so it took us longer to leave the country.

The first people we met at the airport were other Sudanese refugees who immigrated here. They helped us a great deal and I am so thankful for the support they and our church congregation gave us. Despite the challenges, they went out of their way to welcome us and make sure we were represented in the community.

The most difficult challenge about moving to the United States was adjusting to the culture here. I really struggled to form an identity for myself. We were immigrants and people assumed we were black Americans who had already been living here. I remember a lot of misunderstandings at school because I did not speak English.

It was especially difficult for my mother to learn English and the cultural norms. I learned English in a year and I had to interpret for my family because I could speak both languages. Since my parents could not help me with my homework, I had to rely on myself and help my younger brother with his schoolwork. It made me take responsibility for things that would have been done by adults.

The US began to feel like home when I could not imagine life elsewhere. I will always visit Sudan, but I have formed my identity in America. I still speak my native language and I love my Sudanese culture, but I think my strength comes from my drive to navigate both cultures.

I want to show other Americans that we all have a shared human experience. No matter where we are in our journey, our ancestors were once strangers. This country and every other country only thrives when its citizens make an effort to welcome and help those who are starting over. We all have a story of how our family came to this country. Despite the isolation we face and the effects of war, refugees are contributing to this society in so many ways. My experience is only one of many that has yet to be heard and I hope that I can be a voice for those who might be seen as strangers.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Like Kuoth, in the Psalms David often wrote about what home felt like to him. What are the images of home in Psalm 119 and how do they compare to the images in Kuoth's story?
2. Have you had difficulty in learning a new language like Kuoth and her family? What were the challenges? Enjoyments? Successes? Funny stories?
3. Through the Refugee Leadership Academy, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service has assisted many former refugees in learning to tell their stories and 'navigate both cultures' as Kuoth said. Share an experience that you have had in attempting to navigate a new culture?

ACTION ITEM

1. Pray for all refugees and those individuals and groups in our communities across the United States that assist in the resettlement process.
2. Log onto lirs.org and sign of for "Stand for Welcome" updates and materials.
3. Take up a special collection and designate it for the work of LIRS in assisting in resettling new refugees into the United States.