

Out of the Ashes: Hospitality (Immigration)

Genesis 12:1-4a

Romans 4:1-17

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I. Introduction

I read an article in the *Washington Post* this week that was talking about the influx of refugees from Africa that have come here recently as persecution of the GLBTQ community in Africa has gotten more and more aggressive, often sadly exacerbated by preachers from the United States who go over there. Many of you know that in Uganda, for example, it is not just a crime to be a homosexual; it's a crime not to report somebody you think might be a homosexual. So there repression just keeps getting ratcheted up and this article was about how hard it is for GLBTQ folks in Africa to get to the United States where it's safe and then to remain here.

We are in the second week of sermon series I called "Out of the Ashes" which is looking at places where there is room for new life to grow out of the areas of our brokenness. Because part of the journey of Lent is to take a good hard look at those places in our lives both as individuals and as a community where there is brokenness, where we have either caused brokenness or participated in a system that has been broken, where we have sinned, where we have fallen short of God's call to us because it's only when we can start acknowledging those places that we can accept the forgiveness that God offers us through the Cross of Christ and accept the new life that God offers us through the power of the resurrection.

We're going to reflect throughout this series on the lectionary texts that the church has laid out, but looking at specific issues that those lectionary texts raise about

those areas of brokenness. I'm going to talk for a little bit this morning about our call to hospitality and the places that we have fallen short in sharing that hospitality in this whole area of immigration.

II. We are All Immigrants

Immigration is an important topic for us as Christians because as you just heard in this scripture lesson and as you heard Janet talk about in the children's time, from a faith perspective, we are all immigrants. We are people who have been called out of a place that we knew, that was home, and called to a new land.

Our faith story begins with this narrative of Abraham's call and it's not entirely clear why God calls Abraham to move to a new land. For example, why couldn't God have called Abraham to start a new faith community right where he was? In the midst of the folks that knew him and loved him and his support structure? It seems like that would have been an easier thing to do. Or if it was important for that faith community to be birthed in Palestine, Israel, why didn't God call someone there? What is it about this process that makes God call Abraham from one area to an entirely different homeland?

Then, of course, as Janet explained so delightfully to the kids, that process of immigrating never stopped for Abraham. He spent his whole life moving from one place to the next, to the next. All of our early faith story is about being immigrants in a different land, whether that's Egypt, or Babylonia, this is a continual process for the children of Israel of being a stranger in a new place. One of the earliest creeds of the Jewish community is found in Deuteronomy and starts off, "my father was a wandering Aramean, wandering is our corner, is the heart of who we are." Which is why

Deuteronomy says and is echoed throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, “You shall love the stranger in your midst, providing for them food and clothing. You shall love the stranger because you were strangers in Egypt, and God loved you.”

Now, I always get a little bit leery of drawing too strong a parallel between the life of the children of Israel and our experience here in America. But in this whole area of immigration, the parallels are so powerful because we as an American community are a community of immigrants. Very few of the people in this sanctuary were native to this land, we all came from someplace else. Some of our forebears were fleeing religious persecution, some were fleeing political persecution, some were brought as slaves, some were looking for a new life and some felt God calling them to this new place. But each came here and started a new life, and each in their way, shaped what this country has become. We are all a land of immigrants.

III. Blessed to be a Blessing

Another piece that we see in this wonderful story of Abraham is that God’s call is to Abraham but it’s not really about Abraham. God’s call is not about Abraham’s relationship, God’s call is that Abraham is going to be a source of blessing for all of the world.

This story, of course, takes place immediately after the story of the Tower of Babel, in which all of the people of the Earth have been scattered across the Earth and given different languages so they can’t communicate with one another. That story is immediately followed by this call of Abraham with the clear implication that when God says you are to be a blessing to the nations, that Abraham’s role and Abraham’s family’s role is to be an agent of reconciliation, to heal the brokenness that happened

at the Tower of Babel, that we are called to be a community that is building bridges between differing people.

Paul picks up this theme by noting that Abraham's call is to reconcile the world to God and to one another, a call that Christ has fulfilled by breaking down the barriers between different cultures. Paul is writing, of course, to a Jewish community that have a very strong sense of who it was and a very strong sense that it was separate from the other peoples around it. Part of this letter to the Romans is to say, "Our call is not to maintain separateness but to break down the barriers between ourselves and the Gentiles because in the work of Christ, we have all become children of God regardless of our ethnic and national heritage and we are all brothers and sisters with each other."

Now, Paul's language for talking about this can be a little bit obscure because he talks a lot about circumcision in this passage. He's talking about circumcision as the actual physical act that separates the children of Israel from the people around them. But he uses it also in a broader sense, to refer to the whole range of Jewish laws that set the people apart and the people often understood that to be the reason that God favored them. And Paul wants to be very clear with the Israelites that they are not blessed by God because they obey God's Law, because they have been set aside through this process of circumcision. Paul notes that Abraham was not circumcised when he was called by God, the call came first and the regulations after. The grace was primary and all of Abraham's activity, all of Abraham's good works, flowed from God's graciousness, not the reverse. God didn't choose Abraham because he was good, God chose Abraham as an act of pure grace and through that grace Abraham becomes good.

IV. Grace Precedes Work

Why God chose Abraham is unclear. We don't know anything about Abraham when we run across him in the scriptures, we don't know what his life has been like. We don't know if he's good at something, we don't know what it was that was the reason for God's choosing him and Sarai. This was a cause of great speculation among the ancient rabbis, why were Abraham and Sarai chosen? We don't know.

Genesis doesn't seem to have much interest in who Abraham was; it's got enormous interest in who Abraham became. Abraham's right action follows God's bestowal of grace. Dear friends, I want to suggest that this used to be at the heart of our understanding of immigration as well, so hang with me here just for a minute. At the base of the Statue of Liberty, you'll find these words, which many of you know, "Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she, with silent lips, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore, send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" See, what those words reflect and call us to is that at some point in our history we understood that the people came to our shores, came to us because they needed to be here. We wanted the homeless, the tempest-tossed the wretched masses, we wanted the poor folks, we wanted the people who all they brought was a yearning to be free.

I want to suggest that that's a very different perspective than we bring to our immigration conversations now, which have to do with what's their educational level, what jobs can they fill for us. We're looking for the best and the brightest and we've forgotten that God doesn't work through the best and the brightest. Amen? We don't

like to hear that here that's why that was a rather subdued Amen. We're going to get to Amens a little bit later so remind me about that. Let me try that again, God does not work through the best in the brightest. Amen? God doesn't work with us because we're educated, because we're talented, because we speak the language well. God has this uncomfortable way of acting primarily through people that we don't pay much attention to. People like Abraham, who we don't know anything about. Criminals like Moses. People doing the thankless jobs in the field like David, fishermen, tax collectors, these are the people that God chooses to transform the world.

It's very easy as we get distant from our own immigrant roots to forget that, to forget that most of our forbearers came to this country bringing very little with them other than who they were. It's very easy to get judgmental about those people who don't speak our language and forget that it wasn't more than a hundred years ago that public schools in our nation were bilingual in many areas, except the other language was German. It's very easy to get self-righteous about what got us to this place and forget the grace that made this journey possible. If it is true that God works through the most vulnerable immigrant, then establishing a healthy immigration policy is not just about doing good for people who need help, it's about opening up our doors so that the new Abrahams can travel to this place, and start to create the wondrous diversity of community that has been the hallmark of life in our country since its inception, this wonderful melting pot of cultures and ethnicities that had made us who we are.

V. Conclusion

There was another story in the *Post* this week about the conundrum the Republican party faces on how to deal with immigration. On the one hand, having some desire to be fairly restrictive, some elements of the party weren't going to be very restrictive and other elements that recognize that there needs to be a more intentional outreach to the Latino community. I want to suggest this is not a Republican conundrum, because what that means is the Republicans have to figure it out while the Democrats sit smugly by on the side. This is not a Republican or Democratic issue, this is an American issue. Solving this immigration impasse is part of what we are all called to give voice to. We have got to come up with policies that chart a clear path to citizenship for people who come to our country. We have got to establish policies where the children of immigrants are being educated and fed and clothed and have healthcare available. We have got to figure out how to do that because that is the core of who we are as Christian disciples, and the core of what is best about this magnificent country.

Our call, as Deuteronomy reminds us, is to love the stranger in our midst, providing for them food and clothing, "you shall love the stranger because you were strangers in Egypt where God loved you."

Amen.