God’s People on the Move

Sermon by the Rev. Bernadette Hartsough

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How many of you have lived in another state? Another country? Another country with another language? What was that like? (En Espanol, ¿Cómo fue mudarse aquí?) I have lived in 4 states. I have spent 3 weeks in Europe and a month in Puerto Rico. I experienced some disorientation in Italy, in the Netherlands, and in Puerto Rico because of the language barrier. I knew some Italian and some Spanish but I did not know the culture in which it was used. When I moved to different states, it was the climate and finding my way around that was hard. At first it was fun then it became exhausting to have to learn so much information to survive~~. Imagine leaving your homeland, your family, and your culture to live somewhere else.~~ For the next few Sundays, we will be learning about God’s people. From their lives we will see how our journey of faith is not static-not set in one place among one people.

Back to moving, if you have lived somewhere else, why did you move? People move for many reasons; jobs, education, weather, and to be close to family. People throughout history immigrated to other areas because of weather disasters such as ancient, floods, droughts, and pests. They also moved because of war, slavery, corrupt governments or rulers, and health reasons. When I say health reasons I am thinking of climates like Great Britain that are cold and damp and cause lung issues.

The story of Abraham and Sarah is a story of a people and their ancestry. They are stories that highlight what was importantly to these people; family, hospitality, doing the right thing, following God’s call. They were people that had to learn how to live lwith others who were different. Their stories explain how they came to live where they were, justifying the land they moved into, and mostly importantly they were stories that reveal how the people experienced God living among them. God’s movement in human life. They were called the chosen people of God because they experienced Gods power and direction in their lives.

Most of these stories in Genesis were kept orally and written down when God’s people were displaced in Babylon. They wrote them down at a time when they needed their history so they wouldn’t lose it. They needed to remember how God lived and worked among them and through them.

Abraham had a lot of faith because he did what God told him to do; he left his homeland to live where God commanded. His homeland was in Ur which is modern day Iraq with his tribe or clan. His journey in the middle East was from the Northeast to the Southwest. It was an area that consisted of people whose religions were based on sacrifice and gods that corresponded to the weather and agriculture. Some of the people worshiped the sun because it sustained plants and other life. Some worshipped the moon and the rain. Think of where Abraham lived. He is living in an area where you worshipped the sun and the moon. Animal and child sacrifice is a common way to appease the gods. Building stone altars to sacrifice on was a tradition. Telling the stories of ancestors was also a tradition. That is part of the reason many of the stories in Genesis have long lists of ancestors. It is how the stories were told. Abraham is a descendent of Noah. It appears that through Abraham and Sarah God wanted to start again. God wanted to start teaching the people how to live with God and how to put God first.

Abraham heard God’s call. God spoke to Abraham in a very definite way. This was a clear call. But it was not easy. Imagine being asked to leave your country, leave your family, leave your roots, your religion and start a new life… at the age of 75. Where to God? “Don’t worry, you don’t need to know that I’ll show you…”  With the call came the promise. Whenever God says "Go" He always promises “I will…” Abraham left because God told him that he will become a great nation. At that time, Sarah could not have children. God promised him descendants. Abraham didn’t know where he was going - he just knew who he was going with. Isn’t that true of us? Do we know what will happen in the future? God does. That is enough. So, Abraham obeyed and took his family south into the land of Canaan down to Shechem. (En español, ¿cómo fue para ti irte? ¿Qué era lo que más temías?)

Abraham models for us that our Journey of faith is not static in one place. People have always moved from place to place throughout history, that has not changed. Notice it was God who takes the initiative. Abraham wasn't looking for God. God was after Abraham. God chose Abraham, God called Abraham. God nudges and calls us too. We hear God’s call or nudge or still small voice and follow; no matter our age or our upbringing and without knowing what the consequences will be. Jesus and St. Paul say over and over that we need to give up our old life and put on the life of Christ. That’s the adventure of being a Christ follower.

Abraham and Sarah became immigrants in a new land. They were welcomed and assisted as they traveled. This is the story of God’s people. It isn’t just in the Old Testament where God’s people are refugees and immigrants. Mary, Joseph and Jesus fled to Egypt. Think of St. Paul. His life travels are so extensive that it is hard to map them out. For some people staying alive, having a life with an income or following a life of faith means living as a refugee or an immigrant in another land.

Immigration, refugees, and immigrants have been with us since the beginning of humanity. Throughout history, the refugee and immigrant was given hospitality. That’s because the command to be hospitable is part of every religion; especially the three great religions of Abraham and Sarah; Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is written into the law that God gave to Moses to welcome the alien (immigrant). Jesus reiterates this law by saying in Matt 25:35, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me in.” In Islam, hospitality is a core teaching. It is believed that the arrival of a guest is a sign of divine favor.

Interestingly, when the United States was founded, we recruited people to come and settle here. We gave away free land in states like Tennessee. My ancestors were immigrants. My mother was a first generation Polish American. The shift in the last 100 years in the United States is how the refugees or immigrants are welcomed. We got greedy. We started to impose strict rules and standards and started to feel like there was not enough to go around. We started to feel like the new immigrants-the strangers would take what we had. As we have grown and prospered we have forgotten the two main rules that we learned as children: Be nice and share.

We are followers of Christ and we welcome the stranger. There are no excuses anymore. Deporting criminals is one thing. Saying people who come here illegally seeking asylum are criminals is unchristian. Seeking refuge in another land because your life is in danger is not a criminal act. It is desperation and it is also very biblical. Think of Jesus in Egypt and King David when Saul was pursuing him. They found refuge in other lands among other people. As people of God, we are a people on the move making our home wherever God calls us. Sometimes it’s where we were born sometimes in another country. Cultures and languages may change but who we are as a people of God never changes.

To our Spanish peakers-

You are here and I am glad. You are trying to work and live and survive. You live out hospitality in your families and relationships. You remind us of how our families came here. you remind us that Abraham and Sarah and Jesus were immigrants. You give us a chance to live out our faith by welcoming you. I have said this before and I will say it again. I want you here. Thank you for trusting me and God’s people in the Episcopal church.

Usted está aquí y me alegro. Estás tratando de trabajar, vivir y sobrevivir. Ustedes viven la hospitalidad en sus familias y relaciones. Nos recuerdas cómo nuestras familias llegaron aquí. nos recuerdas que Abraham, Sara y Jesús eran inmigrantes. Nos das la oportunidad de vivir nuestra fe al acogerte. Lo he dicho antes y lo diré de nuevo. Te quiero aquí. Gracias por confiar en mí y en el pueblo de Dios en la Iglesia Episcopal.