March 3 2021 Staff Worship

Reflection by Susan Krehbiel

**First Reading Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16**

1When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. 2And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” 3Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 4“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 5No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 6I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 7I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.”

15God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

**Second Reading Romans 4:13-25**

13For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. 14If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

16For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, 17as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”) — the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. 18Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So numerous shall your descendants be.” 19He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. 20No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. 22Therefore his faith “was reckoned to him as righteousness.” 23Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, 24but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, 25who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Good morning. For those who do not know me, my name is Susan Krehbiel and I am the Associate for Refugees and Asylum in PDA. That means that I focus my work almost entirely on humanitarian responses to people who have been forcibly displaced and advocacy for the laws necessary to bring them justice and healing. Today, in this second week of Lent, I wish to share with you a few of my reflections on how today’s readings speak to me as it relates to ministry with refugees and forced migrants. Today’s scripture touches on several themes that come up in my work with congregations.

**The first theme is migration.**

The Bible is a story of migration – people on the move. A friend of mine who is ordained in the United Methodist Church once wrote a thesis on the Bible as an immigration manual. This is not a bad concept because the Bible is filled with stories of migration since the eviction of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden right through to the Peter’s visions of a new Jerusalem.

Abraham and Sarah’s history is one of migration. Even in today’s reading, God says to Abram “Walk before me.” I never noticed that before. Not stand, or sit. Walk. Following this appearance of the Lord, Yahweh appears again along with 3 visitors (perhaps angels) to deliver yet more news. All of this is preface to their own journey after the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah. We are told in Chapter 20 -- **“**From there Abraham journeyed toward the region of the Negeb, and settled between Kadesh and Shur. While residing in Gerar as an alien, “

For many of our Presbyterian congregations, they have lost the connection to their own migratory history and approach scriptures and refugees as a settled community. They ask questions about new migrants while forgetting their own history of migration – whether forced or voluntary – that is in their blood and in their faith history. For the Hebrews, migration is not about somebody else. As our Jewish friends remind us, the Hebrew experience is of a people who were on the move – of exile and exodus, of searching for a new home. And they recall that experience every Friday evening.

**The second theme is Faith.**

As Paul reminds us in Romans, God calls Abraham and Sarah because of their faith. Not because they were perfect. Indeed they were not. They were beyond horrible in their treatment of Hagar and Ishmael, casting them out to an almost certain death. Nevertheless, God called them and they responded. In talking to churches and volunteers about the call to welcome the stranger, to love our neighbors, it is tempting to talk about our acts of kindness as such courageous acts of faith. (Sometimes I think we are confusing faith with self-righteousness.) How noble to share acts of charity with “the least of these,” forgetting that it is we who made them “lesser than” to begin with and not God.

When Abraham and Sarah set out on their journey, they did so out of their deep faith and trust in God’s promise to their family and future generations. These very same values are found in the hearts of today’s migrants. In fact, this type of deep faith is what I so often hear from refugees when they talk about their decision to flee. It is their faith in God that causes mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles to speak up for what is right. Trusting in God, they leave the familiar, setting out toward a strange land for the sake of their children and future generations. It is also their belief that God will protect, sustain and deliver them that gives them courage to do so.

**And the third theme is Names**

In today’s reading from Genesis, God gives out new names. God tells Abram: “No longer shall your name be Abram,[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%2017&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-403b)] but your name shall be Abraham” and “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.”

Names matter. They matter because of what they mean and because of who chooses the name. When we choose words to describe or name a group of people different from our own, how do we choose them? Questions of race and ethnic identity are completely entwined in the refugee experience. In the U.S. immigration debate labels are often used to dehumanize and delegitimize a whole nationality or community. But these are not the names given by God. God sees us and calls us good. God calls us out to “walk before me and be blameless.”

And here is my final thought for today. Early in my work with refugees, I was working with a small non-profit organization that had asylum seekers from 20 to 30 different nationalities come through its doors in the course of a year – from Central America, Middle East, Africa and of all different religious traditions. We held weekly house meetings with the residents which included a time of reflection, usually with the sharing of scripture. I had to decide early on if I understood this God of Abraham and Sarah as a tribal God with messages only for the Hebrew people and their descendants, or if I understood this God of the Hebrew testaments to have something to say to me and to people of other faiths.

I was emboldened then as I am today by Paul’s words ***14If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. .. . . . 16For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham.***

Where we want to put up laws and walls, God is breaking down them down. That we might be inheritors of this Covenant is only possible through that ever expanding love that called Abram and Sarai. A boundary breaking, liberating God who brought the Hebrew people out of Egypt. Who sent Jesus out beyond the Galilean borders so that he might see for himself the breadth and depth of God’s love in a Syrophoenician woman’s love for her daughter. And that we might know, inheritors of the faith, the redemptive love that calls out to us in our sinfulness and our inadequacies -- “Walk before me and be blameless.” May we have the faith of Abraham and Sarah, of refugees of the past and of today, to hope against hope in God’s deliverance. Amen.