

Sermon: “Some Old Testament TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION”

This day’s Old Testament reading is the record of Abraham’s obedience and devotion to God (Abraham’s great faith) as he continued the journey which his father, Terah, first undertook. Terah and his children set out from Ur of the Chaldeans (right near the Persian Gulf) to go to Canaan (which we know as Palestine, the land of the Bible). They got as far as Haran (believed to be in modern-day Turkey) and settled there. After Terah died, it is Abraham, wife Sarah and orphaned nephew Lot who go the rest of the way to this land that Abraham and his descendants are told to possess.

The Psalm responds, this morning, by expressing the righteousness, security and happiness of “the people whom God has chosen as God’s heritage” (pointing, yes, to Abraham and his descendants living in their promised land).

Inside the teaching of Paul, the character Abraham is *key* to understanding “faith”, specifically the dynamics of faith by which followers of Jesus Christ become “saved”. Paul’s argument (as we have read this morning) rests on the fact that Abraham lived generations *before* (i) *Moses*, (ii) *the Ten Commandments* and (iii) *the Law*, so Abraham’s whole relationship with God had nothing to do with Law, or Temple practices, or Pharisaic purity. Abraham’s actions were based solely on trust and commitment to God. And that kind of faith, “*reckoned to him as righteousness*”, is what Paul teaches also “makes righteous” anyone who now believes in *God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead*. All the Law can do, says Paul, is condemn. *Today’s Epistle passage celebrates Abraham as our prototype and ‘faith hero’.*

Our faith hero!

I grew up in Baptist Church Sunday School where David C. Cooke curriculum cycled us year, after year, after year through the stories of Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his

brothers, Moses, and David (and, yes, David C. Cooke was mostly about the males). I remember getting to be quite frustrated by this limited annual repetition ... even seven- and eight-year-old me knew there was much more to be considered! But I surely did join in the intended recognition and appreciation that ***there were faith heroes, here!***

Today I ask you to think with me about the **SHADOW** – a large and dark shadow – that comes with biblical Abraham as ‘faith hero’. It shows itself in today’s Old Testament reading, in just one phrase: “At that time the Canaanites were in the land.” As Abraham arrives, empowered by the promise the land is to be his, he travels through from north to south, building an altar at Shechem, then another near Bethel, continuing “in stages” down into the arid southern Negev, with these words ringing in his ears, “To your offspring I will give this land.” In every place he makes his mark, he does so amongst an indigenous population, later to be done away with.

You’ll perhaps recall how it plays out: After Abraham’s grandchildren go into Egypt to survive a seven-year famine all across the eastern Mediterranean (with grandson Joseph *first* there, *and become Pharaoh’s right-hand-man*), there comes a change of political fate by which the Hebrews become enslaved in Egypt. Moses leads their eventual dramatic escape, plus the people’s succeeding 40 years of wilderness trekking. It is Moses’ successor, Joshua, who champions the promise made to Abraham: by warring, bloodshed and what we moderns would label genocide, the Hebrew people do indeed occupy their promised land.

For any of you who, like me, have *only within the past twenty years* had light shone on the terrible shadow of our story as Settlers on Turtle Island: ***If*** you ***also***, like me, were (i) ***raised*** watching Cowboy and Indian movies, where White Man was cheered for violence against the Savages, at the same time were (ii) ***raised*** immersed in scripture, teaching and preaching *extolling* ‘what comes next’ after our faith hero

announces, “God has given your land to us”, well then you like me are discovering the POWER there is *in stories we unreflectively tell ourselves*, a great POWER that can **distort** and ultimately **do great damage**.

Such **distortion** amongst the peoples of the Near East, and such **great damage** across their lands, have continued from ancient to modern day Israel.

There is just one thread of that oh-so-complex history which I want to pull out from the terribly twisted cord today, because it is the one tied to Gospel (Good News!).

The ‘start end’ of the thread is back in Ur of the Chaldeans with Abraham’s father Terah. Recognize with me that before he set out on his journey, Terah was indigenous there. He had a land. He and his people were dependent upon it, and the stories they told were there, at home on it.

The story that begins with his departure is that of people **not bound or connected to land** that they are sustained by, intimately aware of and dependent upon. Instead, it is a story about obeying God’s call to carry out conquest.

Those here who have been part of MacNeill’s recent sessions on Truth and Reconciliation have had recent exposure to indigenous speakers and the DIFFERENCE between stories, attitudes and practices *grounded* (**literally grounded!**) in the land, water, plants and trees, fish, insects, animals, birds, sun, moon and stars **in relationship with which we are provided for, on the one hand**, and – on the other hand – our biblical stories and practices NOT in that way grounded.

Both kinds of stories have profound, indeed ultimate value. And in our world, where those with power and privilege have gotten to that place using conquest stories **although – let us be very clear about this – not utilizing the fullness of the biblical story, ...** [in our world] it IS (i) the

fullness of the biblical story **and** (ii) humanity's reconciliation with the earth (the nature of which is lived by indigenous cultures) that are essential to humanity's survival ... this week's indication of threat level being the 10+ air quality index we have been breathing.

But I get ahead of myself.

- Remember with me the **full biblical** story: It begins with accounts of Creation (origin stories) that tell us we are put here to be stewards/caretakers of the garden.
- Remember how that landless Hebrew people, when they do take over Palestine, are 'planted' – each tribe with its specific land allotment (and each of those geographies vastly different in terms of climate, topography, resource, agriculture, and possible livelihoods) – [they are “planted”/‘put in place’] **to become rooted once again.**
 - Indeed, the God-directed economy established for them is the Sabbatical System under which any person (or any part of a family) who might lose their land, due to indebtedness, would have it restored during Jubilee years, their rootedness and intimate land-dependence providentially re-established.
- Remember with me that it was the people's rebellious insistence that they “have a king” which shifted their politics and economy away from the Sabbatical System.
 - Then, with this shift, came all the major prophets who observed and incessantly decried the nation's brokenness when people marginalized by land deprivation (in particular, the widows, orphans and resident aliens) were simply left unprovided for.
- Generations later enters Jesus, whose self-understanding from his first public address was as **the fulfillment of Jubilee.**

People, it is the **corrections** to family, economy, politics and religion **when life has been torn** from intimate knowledge of, relationship to,

and dependence upon the land and to constructive and sustainable relationships with the people around one, **that are the Gospel of Jesus Christ**. So we see him include those who had been put out to the margins; we see him touch those said to be polluted; we see him heal the sick; we hear him take the wisdom of the law and the prophets and **fulfill** it all (*complete* it; *make it work* for all those *against whom it perversely had been used*). This Good News is the “destination end” of the thread-of-history I’m pulling on, with you, today. This is Gospel!

Awakenings (like our Truth and Reconciliation sessions) [Awakenings] to our shared history with Indigenous people are one of many things that show us just how much we need the fulfilment, the completion of Jesus’ Way in us (*all those corrections* to family, economy, politics and religion that his Way entails).

You will recognize that in the process of this sermon I have challenged the ethics of Abraham and his descendants under their claim “God told us to do it!” Here, for the record, is how and why this can be so (must be so!): I’ll ‘front-load’ the argument with a few other examples:

1. Slavery, while not questioned in the Bible, we judge to be horribly wrong.
2. Polygamy, while accepted in scripture’s early stories, becomes utterly taboo.
3. The Old Testament prohibition of other-than-unblemished people from access to the Holy is undone within New Testament Christianity.
4. Women, who for centuries were kept from pulpits, now grace a significant and growing proportion of them.

The thing is that Scripture (and Salvation History beyond Scripture) shows us **trajectories** in matters of faith and life. It is those trajectories that we are to live, not some stuck-in-time re-enactment of a biblical time and place. So when we study and see the New Testament’s removal of barriers (its repentance from older ways) as the body of Christ moves

from out from Israel to Samaria, to Antioch, to Africa, to Corinth, to Rome and beyond, we too are to be moved ... further and further moved in the name and for the honour of Jesus.

Today, the Lectionary has put before us things we truly needed to read and ponder, here in between our second and third evenings focused on Truth and Reconciliation. Because – Yes! – deeply-reaching conviction and repentance are required of us, *and* – Yes! – we oh-so-significantly have Gospel to contribute to the process, and to live. Amen.