

Faith Mennonite Church
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“Salvation history: a migrant journey”
Genesis 12; Hebrews 11:8-10;13-16

Several years ago Gerald and I went to the Riverview Theater to watch the movie “Winged Migration” on the big screen. I imagine others of you saw it as well. It was a beautifully filmed portrayal of the mysterious and amazing story of how birds migrate across continents, across deserts, directed by an instinctual map that’s as reliable than gps. I thought of that movie this week as I’ve been musing on human migration. I thought of the differences between avian and human migrations as well as our reactions to the two.

Unlike birds, humans don’t have the same inner clock and guide system that tells them to migrate en masse at a particular moment. Human migration patterns aren’t nearly as predictable or orderly, and they are caused by largely external factors—political upheaval and oppression, war, ethnic disputes, and poverty—as well as human aspirations. Humans respond in awe as we behold avian migration—and even greater awe the migration of nearly weightless butterflies (how do they stay on track in heavy winds? we wonder!). But as we listen to the current national (and international) discussion about human migration the awe is too often replaced by disdain, fear, and argumentation. Human stories of resilience and miraculous overcoming of obstacles are silenced by arguments of legal issues and national sovereignty.

As Christians, our starting place as we address any issue is Scripture and the important stories that Scripture holds for us. In the case of immigration, our Bible—particularly the Old Testament—is a treasure trove of migration stories. Our earliest faith ancestors were migrants, people in search of a homeland. Abram and Sarai (later called Abraham and Sarah) and their descendents were a people on the move. When they finally became a settled people in Canaan, God ordered that they remember the vulnerabilities of their wandering past.

They were to remember in two ways. First they were to remember liturgically, *in worship*, with prayers and songs and offerings. As they brought their offerings to the Levites, who performed the religious ceremonies for the community, each person was to say: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous...” (Deuteronomy 26:5). Equally important, they were to remember *by caring in practical ways* for the most vulnerable people in their community: the aliens, the orphans, and the widows. (You will find many of these references on the sheet of biblical passages on the fellowship area table.)

The experience of wandering was to forever shape the people who came to understand themselves as “God’s chosen people.” They were always to think of themselves as a pilgrim people, sojourners, even when they were settled. They were to be compassionate toward those who, in another time, would follow in their footsteps. As inheritors of this faith tradition, we must approach the topic of immigration first of all as a human issue, more than simply a legal matter or question of national sovereignty. (In our adult education series this month, we will explore each of these matters to some degree.)

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) considers migration to be “one of the defining global issues of the early twenty-first century, as more and more people are on the move today than at any other point in human history. There are now about 192 million people living

outside their place of birth, which is about three per cent of the world's population.”¹ Obviously, immigration is not just an issue that our country alone faces; it is a global issue. It is also a highly complex issue, influenced by a whole host of factors.

The IOM states that

It is not difficult to understand why people from the poorer regions of the globe wish to migrate to more prosperous countries. People have always moved within regions or from one region to another in order to improve their standard of living, to give their children better opportunities to get ahead, or to escape from poverty, war, and famine. This is the iron rule of migration that has governed since the beginning of time.²

While the means and the speed of migration have changed, due to modern telecommunications and transportation, the underlying causes and occurrences are not so different today from the time of our spiritual ancestors Abraham and Sarah.

“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’” (Gen 12: 1-2) .

It’s a curious thing to ponder: why did God begin the formation of a people by calling them to migrate? During my graduate studies in family economics I remember reading an article about family economic stability in which researchers had found a positive correlation between stable income and willingness to relocate. I studied at Michigan State University, in Lansing, MI, in the late 1980s, just down the road from the Detroit automobile industry, which was already in decline due to the energy crisis. Some auto workers who lost their jobs as the economy shifted, relocated or retooled in search of new ways to support their families. Those families usually remained financially stable. Others who held onto the dream that the past would return or who couldn’t imagine life in another place or work in another profession, fell into increasing depths of poverty.

People who are willing to pull up the tent stakes and follow a dream can certainly be misguided, but unless we’re willing to move in some direction it is hard for God to guide us. Movement in the Old Testament is usually a sign that God is at work—even in the difficult migrations, the expulsions, the exile, which were interpreted as punishment or recompense. Just think, for a moment, of the various migrations: Adam & Eve expelled from the Garden of Eden, Cain on the run after he murdered his brother, Abraham and Sarah in search of a homeland, Sarah’s servant Hagar and her child Ishmael banished to the wilderness, Jacob on the run after stealing his brother’s birthright, Joseph sold by his brothers as a slave in Egypt (and there we have the beginning of human trafficking), the exodus of God’s people from Egypt, followed by 40 years of traveling through the wilderness and territory of others, before finally settling in a land that was already settled by others, and later the stories of exile and captivity. The stories go on and on.

There are two things I would like to high-light in our reading from Genesis this morning. First, the passage holds two different reasons for migration—reasons that endure today. One, which we find in the original call of God for Abraham and Sarah to seek a new homeland, is an

¹ <http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/about-migration/lang/en>, January 6, 2011.

² Ibid.

aspiration for a better life. In this case it's not entirely selfish for God promises that Abraham and Sarah's new life will bring blessing to others. I think of the studies that show the positive contributions that immigrants, including those who are undocumented, make to our society through their labor and through the introduction of new cultural habits. Can you imagine life in the Twin Cities without the culinary diversity we enjoy through ethnic restaurants? These would not be here if it were not for the immigrants who have settled here.

In this same text, a second reason also emerges. In response to a food shortage, Abraham and Sarah go to Egypt in search of food. They transition from being "aspirational" migrants to "survivalist" migrants. This pattern will repeat itself later when Jacob's family relocates to Egypt during another famine. It repeats itself today.

Then we get to the troubling part of the story: Upon entering Egypt, Abraham lies and portrays Sarah as his sister rather than his wife. On the surface it looks like a case of chauvinistic craftiness on Abraham's part, to save his skin, with little regard for what it would mean for Sarah. She got pulled into Pharaoh's harem. In the final verses of Genesis 12, which we didn't read this morning, we find that God did not approve of this action. But in an interesting twist, God brings affliction on Pharaoh's household and only indirectly on Abraham and Sarah when they are asked to leave.

Chris Franke, an Old Testament professor at the College of St. Catherine, interprets Abraham's action here, and similar actions by others of the early Hebrew clan, to be in the "trickster" tradition that we find in the folklore of traditional cultures, particularly among disenfranchised people. People who are not afforded legal security often find ways to bypass the system and in their social networks they are revered for this. God's judgment on Pharaoh suggests that God judges those who have the power to be compassionate and to create just systems but don't, rather than on those who, in desperation, seeks ways around the law to provide for their families.

We are setting out on a journey this month—a journey of learning, of hearing stories, of exploring complexity and ambiguity. We may not all agree on all the dimensions of this complex issue of immigration, but I'm grateful to the Missions & Service Commission, and in particular to Ry, Dick Westby, Pierre, Gregg Richardson, and Kathleen Remund, who developed the forum series. They have put us on the move, and when we are on the move, God will guide us!