

Faith Mennonite Church  
March 1, 2015 - 2nd Sunday of Lent  
Joetta Schlabach

### **Blessed with a new identity**

*Genesis 17:1-8, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38*

An article by columnist Carmen Andres, in the most recent edition of *Mennonite World Review*, caught my attention this week. Titled “Too safe for faith?”<sup>1</sup> she commented on several articles she recently read, plus a personal experience of visiting Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Lebanon. The articles in both secular and religious venues noted that American parents are increasingly trying to raise their children in risk-free environments. From Hanna Rosin writing in *The Atlantic*, Andres quoted: “Kids no longer play unsupervised or walk home alone from school ... ‘All play is regulated, either for the sake of safety or the desire of parents to participate in childhood.’” Rosin quoted a Boston College psychologist who suggested that this climate of overprotection is a major contributor to the ills attributed to Millennials: “depression, narcissism and a decline in empathy.”

Andres also quoted missiologist Alan Hirsch, who in a recent interview spoke of the “middle-class American obsession with safety, comfort and convenience. ‘I think Christians are very risk averse, and churches are very, very risk averse,’” said Hirsch. Andres concluded, “In other words, when we give in to the obsessions with safety and security, we water down and strip the gospel of the counter-cultural, radical life and community Jesus calls us to.”

Obsession with safety and security isn’t exactly a new thing. Abram and Sarai, in our Old Testament reading this morning, wanted the security of an heir to carry their lineage forward. Now these were not risk-averse folks. They had spent a good portion of their life following God without knowing the end destination, a journey that took them into more than one precarious, life-threatening situation. Yet, they often took measures to secure their safety and when it came to the question of an heir, they found it hard to trust God, especially as the years, and decades passed by. Sarai finally came up with her own scheme to solve the problem, encouraging Abram, whose name, ironically, meant “honored ancestor,” to father a child with one of their servants.

When that situation turned out less than pleasant for everyone involved, God did not turn away and look for another couple who might be more faithful. No, God returned and again reminded Abram that he *and Sarai* would have an heir. And in so doing he gave them each a new name: Abraham (now the “ancestor of many”) and Sarah. With these new names came a new identity: their heir is not simply an inheritor of their wealth or a guarantor of their legacy. God reminds them anew that God wants their heir to become a nation that will bless *many*. For this to happen, they must “hope against hope” as Paul wrote in Romans, and accept God’s work, God’s way, in God’s time. The few verses we read in Genesis 17 include at least nine references to what God has already done or intends to do. Abraham and Sarah’s task was to trust. And it took them a lifetime to learn.

Jesus’ disciples were on a much shorter-term and steeper learning curve. And Mark’s gospel, in its brevity and intensity seems to compress the three-year ministry of Jesus into what feels like three months. Last week we saw how Mark recorded Jesus’ baptism, his wilderness temptation, and the beginning of his ministry in quick succession (and, oh yes, John’s arrest was in their too!). Today’s reading, at the mid-point of the gospel, launches a major turning point. Immediately prior to these words in which Jesus begins to talk about suffering, Peter has answered a question about Jesus’ identity. “Who,” asked Jesus, “do people say that I am?” Peter responded that people are saying a number of things: some think that Jesus is a new version of John the Baptist, or Elijah or one of the ancient prophets. But when Jesus asks for his opinion, Peter proclaims that he believes Jesus to be the Christ—the Messiah, the special Anointed One from God that the people of Israel have been waiting for. Peter must have felt jubilant, that he was on the winning team. He had found safety and security, the best life-insurance policy one could imagine.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Mennonite World Review*, Feb 16, 2015

But Jesus confounded him. This isn't about safety and security, but about suffering and rejection. Jesus went on to speak not just to the disciples but to the crowds who gathered whenever word got out that Jesus was in the vicinity. "To follow me," Jesus said, "requires a new identity. I'm asking you to separate yourself from the ways you usually identify yourself in terms of family line, occupation, and security. To follow me means entering a new family of my followers, and a new social group that's willing to suffer shame. Yes, shame.

When Jesus said "take up your cross," his followers didn't think of a stylized, empty cross like the one we have in front of us, or the small, ornate crosses we wear around our neck. Nor did they think of cross as a metaphor for a heavy burden. They immediately thought of the crosses that stood along the roads leading to Jerusalem, and other Roman occupied cities, that held the bodies of persons the Roman authorities had executed. Rome used crosses to terrorize, and their action had the added effect of causing shame. Execution meant failure; personal failure and failure of movements. No wonder Peter rebuked Jesus: what representative of God could allowed oneself to be shamed, to become the next victim of the Roman empire?

Although we live in a time when we are once again hearing stories of terror and shame in the world, we Christians in North America are largely removed from these realities. When we think of "taking up your cross," or "giving up something for Lent," we tend to think in terms of small acts of discipline or self-denial. But what God called Abraham and Sarah to, what Jesus called Peter—and us—to, was and is no less than a complete change of identity: letting go of security and prestige for the sake of a new identity in Christ, of being in relationships with God in order to be a blessing to others.

Karoline Lewis, a faculty member at Luther seminary, says that the call to "deny yourself" is a call to relationship, community, and intimacy. The cross, Lewis says, represented "God's commitment to humanity," submitting Godself to terror and humiliation on our behalf. And in the resurrection, the humiliation and shame was removed. Neither Rome nor death could break the bonds of relationship, community and intimacy that Jesus took to the cross.

It was a similar journey to the cross that Carmen Andres took when she visited the refugee camp in Lebanon and met Syrian and Iraqi Christians. She describes "listening to stories of misery, death and suffering" which were "heartbreaking. But," she continued, "I also heard testimonies of God's power in their lives and the lives of the refugees. I heard of bodies healed, dreams and visions, hearts and minds captured by Jesus—lives transformed in ways I rarely see here at home. These encounters," she wrote, "are changing the way I think about my own faith. The people I met are girded with trust and a fierce love in the midst of war and suffering. Their lives confirm the reality of Jesus and God's power, often displayed most brilliantly in and through their community, God's church."

Echoing her experience, is a prayer written recently by a student at St. Peter's Seminary in northern Iraq, where Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) provides English teachers. The student is from a Christian community that fled from Iraq's Nineveh Plain, as the Islamic State group advanced.

As you carried your cross, O Lord, we carried it too.  
We lost everything except the cross hanging around our necks and in our cars.  
We looked at this cross when we were forced to leave our houses.  
It is the cross of the pain and the hope,  
the cross of the sadness and the hope,  
the cross of the resistance and the steadiness  
of those who endure injustice but respond to it in love,  
even when we feel that the injustice is increasing.

We carried this cross from our lands in Nineveh to other lands  
and we still hang on to it.  
In spite of all this, you can see the smiles on our faces;  
you feel the goodness of our neighbors.  
We are full of hope and trust in you O Lord.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Goshen College Lent reflections, 2015