

Last month, we looked at two sections from a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. These two passages used two different images, two examples, two metaphors to talk about God's relationship with us, the church universal. When we come together in worship and in work, we are Christ's beloved church at work in the world. God has a relationship with us and last month we look at two ways of understanding that relationship from the Apostle Paul.

Paul wanted the members of the church in Corinth to know how deeply grounded, how deeply rooted they were in God's love for them. The first image was of a field where we are the plants, the crop and God is the landowner, the crop tender. God sends in workers to care for the crop. While those workers and teachers may change from time to time because the needs of the field changes - God remains steady and present. It is God who knows and loves the land - and everything that lives upon it - deeply, passionately, and intimately. God is not looking for quick cash crop, God is looking for what is best for this land and for all of us.

The second image is of a building - and the most important part of a building - the foundation. If the foundation of a building is not strong, then the building can't last. Paul wanted the church in Corinth to know that in Jesus Christ they had the best foundation possible for the building of their new lives in God. If they built upon that foundation, and shaped their building to the shape of the foundation, then what they built would stand for centuries. It might stand forever. It will stand for however we measure God's time.

Now we're finding a third image for God's relationship with us in this morning's text: faithfulness and journeys to unknown destinations.

The Apostle Paul is now writing a new letter, this time to the church in Rome. The church in Rome is still small and new and the Roman Gods still have the run of the big temples. Paul is about to take a journey to Rome. He didn't found the church, he doesn't know the people but he is hoping to raise some money to fund another journey to Spain where he can establish more

congregations. Paul never makes it to Rome to raise funds, but tradition says he did eventually end up in Rome for trial and execution.

Paul is writing about faith, and Abraham and Sarah.

Abraham and Sarah have important stories in three world faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Christians inherit our stories about Abraham and Sarah from our Jewish brothers and sisters so we share a more or less common understanding of why Abraham and Sarah are important to us. But if you grew up within the Muslim faith, you probably have a different set of stories, and a different understanding about Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. Paul doesn't know about the Islamic teachings, because they don't exist yet. It will be roughly another five centuries after Paul writes this letter before Islam starts to emerge.

This morning I am going to be talking about the same set of stories about Abraham and Sarah that Paul knew. The ones we find in the Hebrew Bible, what we also call the Old Testament, in the book of Genesis. If what I say conflicts with what you were taught as a child or still hold as true today then please have patience with me. We need the same stories about Abraham and Sarah that Paul knew in order to understand his writings.

To summarize very briefly: We meet Abraham and Sarah in the 11th chapter of the book of Genesis. They are already married and have the wealth of flocks and servants. With no explanation to us as readers, nor apparently any explanation to Abraham and Sarah either, God tells Abraham to "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 will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing." So Abraham and Sarah pointed the sheep and the goats toward the horizon and left.

They have significant difficulties along the way. They encounter hostile kings and threatening communities. Since they are already of great age, they try to figure out exactly how God is going to deliver children, and they make two horrible mistakes with Sarah's servant, Hagar. But God remains faithful, even if a little bit too silent for their comfort and - so does Abraham and Sarah, even in their mistakes and mis-judgements.

Eventually, Abraham and Sarah have son called Isaac. Isaac marries Rebekah and they have twins: Jacob and Esau. Jacob marries Leah and Rachel and fathers 12 sons, one of who is named Joseph. Joseph is the youngest and gets his father's favor, which makes his brothers jealous. His brothers decide to sell him to a passing slave trader and Joseph is taken away to serve in the pharaoh's court in Egypt. At first this seems like a great tragedy until a drought comes and the sons of Jacob are forced to go to Egypt and trade or beg for wheat. Eventually, Joseph who now occupies a very powerful position in the pharaoh's court reveals his true identity and the family is reunited in the prosperity of Egypt. However, prosperity never lasts and in a few generations the descendants of the 12 sons, now called Hebrews, are enslaved and in danger of being wiped out because they are seen as a threat by the Egyptians. They are called immigrants, foreigners, and the Egyptians are worried that the Hebrews will have too many babies and change the culture. One of the reasons I am glad we have the Bible is that we keep finding out that everything that scares us now, has always scared us. And that God has always said find a way to welcome each other, not be afraid of each other - but that's another day's sermon.

At any rate, God remembers God's people and calls out the least likely hero - Moses - to lead the Hebrews back out of Egypt and to finish Abraham's journey to the promised land.

Do you like the story? Did you find part of it boring? Like maybe the part where I named all the sons, grandsons, great grandsons? Did you think, wow - that's very distracting? If so, this probably means you're going to miss what Paul is trying to do with Abraham's story. Those of us who grew up in individual-centered cultures don't have a lot of patience with stories about who we come from. For us, it is less important who your grandparents are then who you are. Paul doesn't know about that culture. Paul knows about another culture, group centered culture where who you belong to is everything and the Ancestors are still close by to advise and comfort.

Dr. Kamudzandu is a Zimbabwean pastor and theology professor teaching, preaching and writing at a seminary in the United States. One of Dr.

Kamudzandu's mission is to raise up theological insights that come out of cultures who read the Bible differently from the standard, some might call colonial, viewpoint. Dr. Kamudzandu reminds us that Paul's claim on Abraham and Sarah is the claim that group centric societies make on ancestors. Ancestors maybe no longer living but they are still close by and still intensely influential. Ancestors define our group, Ancestors define us.

Paul is writing to Romans who defined their group as being descended from Aeneas - a person we can find in the Roman Pantheon of gods and goddess. To be Roman is to be a part of the Aeneas family.

But Paul reminds the Rome church that they - like us - are actually part of the Abraham and Sarah family group. That Abraham is more important to us, has more to teach us than Aeneas and still has much to offer us today. Paul is saying our identity as descendants of Abraham is more important than being American or German or even Ghanaian or Nigerian. It is more important than being liberal or conservative, rich toff or working stiff, Immigrant or native born, male or female, convicted criminal or innocent child - any of the ways we take on labels. Our ancestor of identity is not George Washington or Charlemagne but Abraham and Sarah who were chosen by God because it pleased God to do so.

And then Paul tells us that Abraham did nothing to earn God's love, to earn God's choice of the ancient couple. Abraham and Sarah are chosen by God not because of anything they did to earn God's special blessing but because God chose them. And kept choosing them because God keeps promises.

The amazing thing to me is that Abraham and Sarah got up and left. There is no back talk, there is no questioning. No consulting a map or any questions about how far, how long, or should they bring snacks. Abraham and Sarah's faithful response to God's blessing was to just leave and to keep going until God said stop. They trust God even if it meant leaving everything they knew. They trusted God to travel with them because they trusted God to remain faithful to them.

So now we arrive at Paul's point.

We all belong to Abraham and Sarah. They are our ancestors - not just of DNA connections - but because of faith. While God made Abraham and Sarah the ancestor of all nations, Paul tells us, God in God's good and gracious love, also tied us together - as a group that claims Abraham and Sarah as esteem ancestors - as a church that is tended like crops in a field, as a building built upon a solid foundation... and as a people who need to be ready to get up and go when God says go. Our third metaphor, our third image for how God lays God's claim on us is that we also move about. That a relationship with God may mean we have to leave everything we know and go someplace new. But when that happens, God remains with us, keeping God's promise of blessings for us.

This congregation in particular is a congregation where many of us come, stay for a while, and then go again. We can and should lay claim to our ever-traveling ancestors Abraham and Sarah. God traveled with Abraham and Sarah. God traveled with Joseph and his brothers. God traveled with Moses. God traveled with Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus when they had to take asylum in Egypt because of King Herod's wrath. God also travels with us.

Our third metaphor, our third image this morning - Abraham and Sarah our ancestors above all other ancestors - tells us that God chooses us because it pleases God to do so. And that once we have been chosen, God remains faithful. God made a promise to Abraham and Sarah that we can lay claim to today. We are the church of Jesus Christ, beloved by God who knows us and names us and claims us no matter where we can be found. We are always known to God. We can never travel too far away from God. We have been given what Abraham and Sarah were given: The eternal presence of God who creates new life out of death, hope out of despair, and homes out of strange lands.

We belong to God who sends us out and calls us back home again.

We belong to the God who keeps promises.

We belong to God.