

Sermon 22.12.04

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Genesis 17: 15-22

God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and indeed of her will I give you a son. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; rulers of peoples shall come from her.' Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Can a child be born to one who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, give birth?' And Abraham said to God, 'O that Ishmael might live in your sight!' God said, 'Nevertheless your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. Now as for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall give birth to at this season next year.' And when God had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

Luke 1: 39-45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

SERMON (to see slide show, click [HERE](#))

Genesis is a book about beginning, the beginning of humankind, the beginning of Israel, and the beginning of the relationship between God and a particular people.

At the same time that Genesis focuses on one particular family, beginning here in our scripture today with Abraham and Sarah, it also draws connections between all the peoples of the world. The Torah and the rest of the scriptures will claim that while the God of Israel has a special relationship with Israel, the God of Israel is also the God of all the world.¹

The God of Israel is also the God of all the world...

Before we delve more into our scriptures, let's see what bluebirds might teach us this morning -

Most of us are familiar with the eastern bluebird - once nearly extinct in Pennsylvania, (SLIDE) now a common bird found in suburbia, around farms and meadows across Centre County.

Some eastern bluebirds are year-round residents in Pennsylvania, but the majority migrate south in the winter, to the southeastern US or Mexico, returning here in early March.

In the breeding season of spring and summer, bluebirds are territorial, remaining in pairs and family flocks until the young are fully fledged and leave home. There is little mixing and time spent outside of the family unit in those months.

That changes once the weather turns cold, resources become scarce, (SLIDE) and the focus is not on reproduction, but sheer survival. When the temperatures drop, another warm body makes a big difference to survival, and bluebirds are known to seek out cavities at night where they nestle in together to conserve body heat. (SLIDE)

When life gets precarious, they sometimes move in mixed flocks, following chickadees, titmice and others (SLIDE) relying on the safety of numbers and the wisdom of others for finding food.

For those who winter here, the long, loud melodious song used while establishing nesting territories is replaced this time of year with a somewhat softer, shorter song, used not to lay claim to a territory, but to stay in contact with their small flock.

As if navigating all the pressures of daily living wasn't enough, some of the biggest challenges to bluebird survival have been human made. As we've changed the landscape, and with the introduction of Starlings and European house sparrows in the late 1800's, their numbers plummeted. With all the change humans have brought, scientists claim that without our intentionally creating space for them, likely they will die out. (SLIDE) So they've adapted to us - willing to build homes close to ours. (SLIDE)

¹ [Commentary on Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)

They have learned to not only survive, but thrive in all sorts of conditions, adapting to new spaces and challenges. Bluebirds are resilient - and peace makers of a sort too, for eastern bluebirds have **been known to care for the kin of others - caring not just for bluebird young, but of other species!**

In a recent study of how human made noise impacts nesting², researchers discovered bluebirds going into not only their own nest boxes, but caring for the chicks of neighboring tree swallows as well.

(VIDEO SLIDE)

Scientists are not sure why - likely they are simply responding to the cry for food, and since they have trouble differentiating their young from that of other species - they feed those that cry, that are hungry, regardless of lineage.

They hear the need and respond, making unlikely alliances to care for the vulnerable.

In the midst of stress, at least some bluebirds respond to the call of the needy, joining the tree swallow parents - visiting and feeding not only their own young, but the young of others as well.

What might they have to teach us?

(Neutral IMAGE)

Our scripture this morning, from Genesis 17, tells the story of the beginning of the people Israel - finally, finally God's promises of a child for Abraham and Sarah comes to fruition.

God's everlasting covenant will be passed down, not in the expected ways of that time and culture, through Abraham's first born, Ishmael, but in a new way - through the one to be conceived in Sarah.

But that's not all - God blesses this new one to be born, as well as Ishmael. God blesses both, saying -

"Nevertheless your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him... Now as for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous"

Abraham's descendants will diversify. Abraham becomes the father of three great faiths: Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

Our scripture also tells the story of the selection of Sarah as the woman through whom Israel, the chosen people in their telling of their own story, will be born.

² [Bluebird cares for another species' offspring - The Wildlife Society](#)

Our stories from last week - the enslaved woman, Hagar, running for her life, yet obediently returning to Sarai and Abhrm at the angel's command; and Mary - the unmarried woman, scandalously found to be with child - alongside our stories from today, Sarah, finally, at the age of 90, about to bear a son, and from the gospels we meet Elizabeth, also thought to be barren, holding and welcoming new life; these stories show us the way.

These stories - from scripture and from our natural world - remind us that all - ALL - who produce and nurture children, children of any age - all who nurture - participate in God's work in the world and are recipients of the promise of God's care and keeping.

While the texts and traditional interpretations privilege some children, characters, and lineages above others, God's promise to Hagar, her son, and their descendants, found here in our reading today, is an act of God's fidelity that transcends deeply rooted regional and ethnic conflicts. No matter how fractured the relationship - and there would be, and continues to be, bloodshed - Israelites and Ishmaelites - the sons and daughters of Isaac and Ishamel, remain bound together as kin....

Another story -

We don't know his name, for safety reasons I assume - we don't even see his face - but hear his story³... (IMAGE)

Several years ago, when he was 16 years old, his family inherited a piece of land from his grandfather.

His family felt joy as they started building their dream home. (IMAGE MAP) But the land they inherited is located in the West Bank near one of the biggest Israeli settlements, east of [al-Khalil](#) (Hebron). Al-Khalil, city of the beloved, (IMAGE-MAP) is the site of the Al-Ibrahimi Mosque and Tomb of Patriarchs a joint structure that was once a mosque, (IMAGE) and now half has been made into a synagogue - over what's believed to be the ancient burial place and tombs of the Patriarch Abraham/Ibrahim and his family - a revered pilgrimage site for Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

(IMAGE CITY) It's here, just outside the city, that his family started construction of their home.

During the construction process, unexpected visitors from the Israeli authorities handed his father a 'stop construction order,' claiming that the home was illegally built and must be stopped or demolished, like hundreds of other Palestinians houses that faced the same destiny due to the State policy.

Over time multiple warnings came - and then the attacks began - verbal and physical - from Israeli settlers.

³ https://cpt.org/2022/11/22/red-hats-to-red-jackets?blm_aid=33046

One day, in the midst of increased tensions, some foreigners with red hats came and introduced themselves as CPT,(IMAGE) formerly Christian Peacemaker Teams, now known as Community Peacemaker Teams, offering to join them in their struggle.

The settlers continued showing up and attacking them, for almost forty days, with the CPT workers remaining in their house day and night - 40 days of sharing life together.

When their land planted with olives, grapes, and almonds was vandalized, together they re-planted. (IMAGE) One Community Peacemaker Team supporter reminded his family that cultivating and planting is the best sign of life and hope.

Throughout these days and nights filled with uncertainty, together, they learned how to live, love, hope, resist, adapt, trust and believe.

“I learned how to be a human being” he writes - and out of that shared sense of humanity, in the midst of continued uncertainty, he began volunteering in his community. (IMAGE)

Now, working as a CPT volunteer, he accompanies children to school, protecting them from the ongoing clashes and possible attacks from soldiers.

The story hasn't ended.

(IMAGE)

People of different faiths - all born out of the promise of God to bless both Sarah and Hagar's children - continue struggling, some fighting, some working for peace.

It's to this world of fractured and unreconciled peoples, God sends a holy child as the embodiment of reconciliation. This singular extraordinary child is sent to a family (IMAGE) - Mary and Joseph; IMAGE, an extended family, (IMAGE - click twice) Elizabeth and Zechariah, this child is sent to a series of communities Bethlehem, Nazareth, Capernaum and more, (IMAGE) a people, Israel, (IMAGE), and all peoples, Gentile and Jew representing the fullness of humanity (IMAGE). This child of hope and peace is sent to us⁴...

As Advent readings, these texts call us to attend to our place in this heritage, this family, this community, this people. We are to attend to our place and prepare for the return of the holy child who will complete the work of reconciliation, restoration and peace.

May we have the vision, God's vision of peace, to make it so. Amen.

⁴ Gafney, Wilda. 2021. *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church, Year W*. Church Publishing, NY, NY.