

Hosanna Preaching Seminar
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TEXT: Genesis 12:1-4

TITLE: Unfaithful Phrases – “My Country Right or Wrong”

Story A (from Genesis 12): The Lord God called to Abraham and his wife Sarah and said “Go from your home country to the land I will show you and I will make of you a great nation.” Story A happened a long time ago, involving ancient people in a foreign land. So to understand it better, some people set it alongside another story – Story B (found in most American history textbooks): In 1620, William Bradford and the pilgrims traveling on the Mayflower set foot on Plymouth Rock and helped settle a new nation - the United States of America. Now, there are lots of details you could add to both Story A and Story B. You could talk more about who Abraham was and what it meant in 2000 BC to be a stranger wandering in a strange land. You could say much more about Story B, about how Native Americans had long existed on the land that came to be called America, and how telling the story solely from the pilgrims’ perspective gives a skewed description of our nation’s history. But more importantly, once Story B is placed beside Story A, certain words take on an added emphasis: *God, the land I will show you, make of you a great nation*. At the same time, other words are pushed to the side and de-emphasized, especially the phrase “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Correcting this imbalance is how we move from unfaithful phrases back to life-giving words of faith.

Let’s start by talking for a moment about the word “nation.” We forget that the idea of a nation is a relatively new concept. There have always been places where people lived together and their land was controlled by someone: a tribal chief, a king or queen or other person of authority. It wasn’t until the 17th century that the idea of a sovereign nation really took shape. After the Reformation, Europe was a mess – warring groups fought over territory, power, and religion. For a span of 80 years beginning in 1568, the Dutch were fighting the Spanish and the House of Habsburg, with the French joining into the battle as well. All of this got worse in 1618 when the horrible Thirty Years’ War started, pitting the Catholic Holy Roman Empire against the Protestant lands of the Netherlands and Sweden. It finally came to an end with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, out of which emerged a clear concept of territorial sovereignty. Nations were now to be seen as independent countries with borders, laws and rulers that were to be

respected. So basically when we think of “nations,” we are dealing with something codified just over 350 years ago.

Now when God says to Abraham, “I will make of you a great nation,” God isn’t thinking of a country with borders, armies and homeland security officers. The Hebrew word used in Genesis is “goy,” which simply means “people” - *I will make of you a great people*. Now remember to whom God is speaking. Abraham is 75 years old and his wife is barren. The power of God’s words isn’t in the promise of nation-building, but in the promise of child-bearing and family-building. Abraham’s history was almost over. He had no children. Once he and Sarah died, their story would be done. Yet God speaks into places of barrenness, of hopelessness and offers a future to a people who had no future. Genesis 1: in the beginning God created life. Genesis 12: in the context of one family, who were convinced there was no way ahead, God created new life and new blessings – and not just for them, but for all families of the earth.

I’ll come back to Abraham in a moment. In thinking about an unfaithful phrase to link to this passage, I realize that “my country, right or wrong” is a loaded phrase to bring up in a sermon. Should we not love our country? Is patriotism a bad thing? No, patriotism in and of itself is a good thing, an honorable thing. But to say “my country, right or wrong” is to accept a flawed patriotism that is blind to criticism and unwilling to admit any wrong. The author James Baldwin said, *I love America more than any other country in this world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually*. The lawyer Clarence Darrow said, *True patriotism hates injustice in its own land more than anywhere else*. A nationalism that broaches no critique - that insists on “America First” fully aware that assertion will intentionally harm others, is neither patriotic nor faithful. That is not what was meant when God said “I will make of you a great “goy”, people.”

I had the privilege as a young adult of studying music for three years in Europe. I did not know what it meant to be an American until I stepped onto non-American soil. I knew what it was to be from Paola, Kansas because I’d been to other cities in Kansas. And I knew what it was to be from Kansas because I’d visited other states. But I didn’t know what it was to be an American until I lived in Austria, until I traveled to Germany, Italy and Czechoslovakia and looked back across the waters to my homeland. I’m not sure anyone can understand what it means to be an American until you have stood on foreign soil or until you have metaphorically stood in the shoes of someone from another land.

I’ll go further: I’m not sure you can understand what it means to be a Christian until you know someone, listened to and care for someone who follows another faith tradition. What does it mean to follow Christ is you only know other Christians? That may get you into arguments with them about Presbyterians vs. Methodists or Baptists – about which hymns should be sung on Sunday – about what color the carpet should be in the sanctuary. But what does any of that tell you about God? Instead get to know a Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or agnostic.

Listen to what stories they put together to make up the narrative of their life. Compare that with your stories – the ways you make sense of this world through your stories of Abraham and Sarah, Jesus, Paul, and Mary Magdalene. Maybe this is a Lenten exercise for each of us: to find someone who believes differently from you so that you can better understand and appreciate your own faith.

George Bernard Shaw said ironically, *Patriotism is your conviction that this country is superior to all other countries because you were born in it.* If we focus on this being “my country, right or wrong,” we take personally any criticism or questioning of our homeland. In the same flawed way, we are tempted to hear the promises of Genesis 12 and focus only on what’s in it for us as children of Abraham. We hear about a land God will show us. We hear about being a great nation. We hear about a blessing – all of which we personalize and try to quantify. What happens is that we hold up Genesis 12 as Story A, and then we put other stories beside it: Story B about the pilgrims and America’s manifest destiny; Story C about God blessing Christian nations even if that means excluding favor from other nations; Story D about how Abraham’s great nation is to be equated with the modern state of Israel even though it builds walls, erects illegal settlements and claims rights that oppress others in that land.

Yet we know that the pilgrims’ story cannot be told without also speaking of the Native Americans, and the later Middle Passage and forced slavery of Africans, and the pervasive injustices toward women, immigrants, and sexual minorities that we still need to resolve in America. It’s also true that calling ourselves a Christian nation cannot be done in such a way that it invalidates other nation’s stories and categorically denies that God is at work in other lands and through other faiths. And although the horrors of the Holocaust shall never be forgotten or brushed aside, Israel’s modern nationhood must be based on principles of democracy and justice for all, including Palestinians, just as we hold ourselves to similar standards here.

If we do all that, then the power of Story A from Genesis 12 can truly be heard. God took a story of barrenness and turned it into one of promise that has never been more relevant than today. Don’t read this scripture and think of pilgrims planting a flag near Plymouth Rock. Think of the times you’ve had to leave home and you didn’t know what lay ahead: When you went off to college, fully stepping into adulthood. When you signed up to serve in the military and awaited papers saying where you’d be deployed. When you were told your job has ended and you pack up your belongings not sure where your next paycheck will come from. When you looked at your spouse and realized you cannot live together any more. When you looked at your partner and recognized that abuse can no longer be tolerated. When you handed over your car keys and stepped away from the independence you once knew. When your long-time home is only a memory and you now need assistance to take care of yourself.

God stepped into Abraham's life at that type of moment, telling him to step away from all that had given him security – his father's house, his family's land, his own place, for right or wrong, under the sun. By faith, barren Abraham and Sarah stepped forward to answer that call to go. And in doing so, they learned who God truly is – and what it means to be blessed and to be a blessing. In time, next to that Genesis "Story A" would come another story – this one involving Jesus saying similar words to his early disciples, "Come; follow me. And you will be a blessing." Both tell the same story – that we are to let go, walk by faith away from a partial present into a rich and blessed future. Others will be beside us. Others will share meals with us. Others will help us learn what it means to be human, to be American, to be a Christian. And together, in you and in this land, by God's grace and through Christ's love, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

AMEN