

Sermons from Park Hill: June 8, 2008

Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado

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Genesis: 12:1-9
“Faith, Trust, and a Journey”

Just about a year ago now I had my second phone interview with the search committee from Park Hill. I felt that God was calling us into a relationship. I just didn't know whether the search committee had the same feeling or whether they had gotten the same memo from God. There is a list of churches seeking pastors on the UCC website that is updated every month on the 10th. On February 10th I read the two sentence description of Park Hill and said, “Oh my God. That's where we're going.” Art and I had only decided a month or two earlier that we would even begin looking and here was this place that I felt – with this kind of “knowing” – that I believed God wanted us to be. Fortunately, when I felt like Park Hill was the place God wanted me to go, Park Hill *wanted* a new pastor. What if I had simply decided to show up – and you had a pastor already in place. “Sorry but God wants *me* to be here.” But there was somebody already in the land.

See, I can't read this text from Genesis about Abram being called by God to leave his home and move to this new land without thinking about the people who were already there. Verse six says, “At that time the Canaanites were in the land.” And thus began a battle that is still waged today. Who does this belong to, and why?

Whether we believe the earth is billions of years old and has evolved into what life is today or whether creation was 6,000 years ago, we agree that it is a matter of faith that we give credit to God for giving us heaven and earth, light and dark, animal and plant and human. We don't have to agree how, but we affirm that the earth belongs to the Lord, and that the stewardship of all things is our response to God for the gift of creation. We take care of it. But, ultimately, earth belongs to God. It's a theological statement.

Walter Bruegemann, one of the most respected theologians across the spectrum today, who also happens to be UCC, wrote *A Theology of Earth and Land*. In it he said, When we talk about 'earth,' nothing is owned, except by God. But when we talk about 'land,' it's a completely different story. Even though earth and land are from the same Hebrew word – *erets* – we think of earth and land in very different ways. “God may own the earth, but, by God, this land is mine!” Land possession, Bruegemann says, “is always conflictual.” “Everything is owned according to legal legitimation.” When someone owns land, it's in the presence of the many who do not - and who may even have been denied ownership, often by force and violence or by legal manipulation.

I had never thought about it that way before. The earth belongs to God is a theological statement. This land belongs to

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me is a political statement. Put them together, and it's a problem. This was made very real last summer when my high school church youth group and I travelled to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. We learned about the constant manipulation of the US government with the Lakota over the very subject of land. After more than 100 years and decades in the courts, the government is finally willing to acknowledge that the land, in particular the sacred lands of the Black Hills, was wrongfully taken and tens of millions of dollars have been put forward to pay back the tribe – a tribe desperately in need of money. But they won't take it. The first time I heard that, my response was to set aside your pride and take what you can get – before they change their mind again. Don't be so obstinate, impractical, I thought to myself. But, they explained, you can't sell what is sacred. They believe that creation began in the Black Hills; taking money for the Black Hills would be like selling your mother, now covered in tourist attractions. They truly believe the earth belongs to the Creator and the idea of selling pieces of land, individual ownership, goes against everything they believe.

Those who promoted the settling of the West believed in 'manifest destiny.' Even, God intended for this to be mine, without concern for whose it is now. When the Pilgrims and Puritans came to the shores of this continent, it was to build a New Jerusalem, a City on a Hill, and a beacon of light to the nations. They didn't include that the light would come from setting fire to native villages. Someone was already in the land, but, in their mind, God wanted them to have it. It exposed the conflict of combining the theology of a New Jerusalem and a politics of Manifest Destiny – and exposed the conflict.

The terminology of Manifest Destiny began in the 1840s with Jacksonian Democrats to annex or "take" all the land from the Atlantic to the Pacific, the expansion of the western frontier. It was the United States' Manifest Destiny to cross the North American continent, essentially by any means necessary. And having accomplished this, the term was taken up again in the 1890s, this time by Republicans, to acquire lands outside the continent, and so by various means, the US acquired the Philippines, and Puerto Rico, and Guam in 1898 and kept adding Pacific and Caribbean islands. Then Panama...

Some of the rationales at the time included the need for economic growth, places to buy and sell goods. Some advocated that we needed more territory so we could become a world power, although a benevolent one. But there was also an underlying racism that the white leaders of the US government were more capable of governing than native peoples. It was often expressed as a "divine right" and the church seemed more than happy to support this expansion. It meant that they could "civilize and Christianize" the heathen – always of a different skin color. The advances of the government into new territories helped missionaries gain easier access to more land to evangelize. Not all that happened is bad, but I think the initiative was more like Abraham moving in and saying this is what you're gonna get than the Canaanites saying this is something we want.

One might think that Manifest Destiny is only a term in history, but it's also behind some current foreign policy. The notion of the United States *bringing* freedom and democracy to the rest of the world – and especially in the Middle East – has been

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described as a modern form of manifest destiny, mixed with a little "savior" complex. It's like a religious duty to bring this gift to you. But if we act this way because God ordained it, we can't understand why those receiving our gift don't want it. Again, what did the Canaanites think about Abraham's story that this land was now going to be his because it was promised by God.

Of course, it's not that simple. The same people who think we shouldn't be in Iraq, who think that our presence is damaging, in the next sentence, might say that we need to go and intervene in Darfur. Choices like these are not unaffected by economics, power, and some racism. These choices are not unaffected by a sense of divine right, at times – and the mixing can be dangerous – and good people get caught in the middle of the debate. In *Sojourners* magazine, Tony Campolo wrote that "around the world, Muslims view the American army as a Christian army reviving the likes of the medieval Crusades, which were marked by a massive slaughter of Muslims and the occupation of holy Islamic lands by so-called "Christian" conquerors." Tony is not a raving liberal but a Republican and a leader in the evangelical world. Yet he recognizes the dangers of having a God-complex.

The reality of Abraham and the Canaanites involves God and land, and as we can recognize from conflicts throughout history and today, mixing the two creates a volatile and often intractable situation. From American Indians and whites to Israel and Palestine, the difference between earth and land, is striking. This text serves as a prophetic warning, although it wasn't meant to do that.

The Yahwists who put this part of Genesis together were not prophets and their

concern was not for the Canaanites but to tell how God and humans interact with other; communicate. They trace our ancestry and relationship to Yahweh, the Lord, from the very beginning of creation. Up until this point in the Bible, though, history has been painted in the broadest strokes, involving all humanity, but from this point on, biblical history will be viewed through the ancestry of one person - Abraham. And in that beginning, as they locate their place, they honor the courage of Abraham and Sarah following as God leads them. The background of the story may be troubling, but the purpose is powerful and meaningful.

Abraham and Sarah are among the most unlikely to birth a nation, to produce offspring that will be as hard to count as the sands on a beach – they're both about 75 years old and she is barren. They had really done nothing exceptional to merit such special favor. But they start out on a journey that has no destination, because they heard God call. It's a story about unlikely people who act in faith and leave on a journey. That's a story we can relate to. We can appreciate and understand the complexities of the context and see how real it is even today. We can even identify how we sometimes may act with a savior-complex in other people's lives – people who have no interest in our coming to butt in, and how that can create an intractable conflict. But the story I find in this text for today has to do with faith, trust, and a journey.

In his commentary on Genesis, E.A. Speiser describes this passage as "the start of an epic voyage in search of spiritual truths" and "the very beginning of the biblical process." I like the drama implied by an "epic voyage." And those spiritual truths are part of three

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major religions – Abraham is central to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But what intrigues me more is his statement about “biblical process.” What is that about?

People in the Bible were moving all the time. We might think of biblical process as movement. The Bible is full of journeys, and plenty of them to unknown places. Whether it’s the slaves leaving Egypt, wandering for 40 years, or the people being carried off into exile, “how do we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land,” or even Jesus traveling from city to city, we hear how others have *kept* their faith and how we must *have* faith *on the way, in stages*, to unfamiliar places. And we have to confront our longing for the past, a longing for what used to be. Once the Hebrew slaves have escaped Egypt, one of the first things they do is complain that the food was better back there. We have to let go. But, movement also implies trust in the One calling.

This is not just about physical relocation – a new city, a new job. It’s moving on a journey deeper. Trust in the One who is calling and faith in the unknown destination must be developed to simply move deeper. But, what is the impulse to go deeper? If everything in our lives seems pretty good, and we’re not terribly dissatisfied with our life, what is there to draw us out of our comfort? If things are just fine, what would make us seek anything else? Abraham was set. Except for offspring, he was wealthy according to every measure; he had respect and position... He had enough. Not unlike many of us. Why would we seek to change that?

I went back to the text to find out. Verse 2 reads, and God said to him, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great.” I don’t have a lot

of interest in having a great name. I wouldn’t turn it down, but it’s not a big motivation. I certainly am not interested in becoming a nation. A little family and a church is enough for me. I wouldn’t mind being blessed – who doesn’t want a little more blessing – but I’m not *not* already blessed. Did Abraham have bigger ego needs than us? It’s the last line of verse 2 that I find compelling: I’m going to give you these things “So that you will be a blessing.” “In you all the families of earth shall be blessed.” If only you have faith to move forward, trust in the One who is calling you, and resist your fear of the unknown destination of that journey.

I believe that at some point having enough is not enough – not as deeply satisfying as we thought it would be when we sought to achieve it. Some day we will discover that having enough is not enough – and acquiring *more* will no longer be the answer. Then what? On that day, we will hear and know that being a blessing to others is the reason God put us here in the first place – and without it, life will not hold deeper meaning.

Sometimes the realization that comfort is shallow comes from a loss, the death of a loved one or giving up a dream you realize is not meant to be. Sometimes such realization arises from a crisis, of security, of faith – a shaking of the very foundations of our lives. Must we wait for such drama? If we engage in the spiritual practices of listening, discernment, prayer, meditation – some intentional way of being open – such realization will unleash a desire to journey deeper into our spiritual potential. A journey deeper into our spiritual potential will revolutionize our satisfaction with having enough.

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There are troubling parts to this story. I see in it a prophetic counter to our illusions of manifest destiny and a caution against forcing our values – even if we think they are God’s – onto others. I find in this text a fascinating illustration of the difference between the earth as God’s and the land as mine, the clash of theology serving politics or politics serving theology.

But beyond such prophetic warnings lies a story of faith and trust and a journey, an unlikely couple who said yes. They could have stayed put, with lots of good reasons. Things were just fine. But they ventured out before they even knew where they were going.

I think it’s a call for each one of us too – for a journey deeper into our spiritual potential. To acknowledge that having enough is not enough until we our lives are a blessing for others. Not, “God told me to bless you whether you want it or not,” but a life that seeks not its own comfort but the depth of fulfilled faithfulness. The last thing about their journey: It wasn’t until they were on the road, that they had left, that they actually saw the promise ahead of them. Don’t go west for more land, folks. Go deeper until you find unity with the whole earth.