

## “We Love to Tell the Story”

### Genesis 12:1-10

“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘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 I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land.’ So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on by stages towards the Negeb. Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land.

### Leviticus 19:34

“The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.”

“Now the Lord said: “Go from your country and your family and your family’s home to the land that I will show you...”

Her name was Katina Pa-rask-evou-polis (Paraskevopolis). She was from Greece. At the age of 16 she packed up her worldly belongings, and left her family home and country, and began a migrants journey to a new land.

Like the story we love to tell of Abram and Sarai, who traveled in stages along the way, the first stage of 16-year-old Katina journey was a stop in France to meet for the first time a 36 year-old man named Nick Angelos. They were married before crossing the Atlantic to America.

After settling in Wisconsin, Nick served in WW I. He later owned a tavern in Beaver Dam. After Nick sold the tavern, he and Katina migrated again, this time south to London, Wisconsin to live with her daughter and her husband, an immigrant from Italy. Nick and Katina were Staci’s maternal grandparents. Some of you may have known Nick and Katina?

Nick and Katina now reside beside their daughter, Bess, and her husband, Sam, in the Kroghville Cemetery.

“Now the Lord said: “Go from your country and your family and your family’s home to the land that I will show you....”

On a Sunday morning in 2004, two families, from Mexico, walked into worship, a bit late, at First Presbyterian Church in Marshfield. It was a day that would change the ministry of that church, and my own as a pastor.

In welcoming them, we began to get to know them. In time they shared their stories of leaving behind a life of economic hardship and poverty, as well as fear of violence due to the drug cartels, of risking their lives, to cross a river and a border, in search of a new land and new life, finding it in Marshfield and at First Presbyterian Church.

In learning their stories over meals, during worship and in their homes, we discovered something of our own immigrant stories woven into their story, and our faith story.

To gain a better understanding of their experience and our immigrant families, we traveled across a border to hear more stories of those who had migrated up from Central America and southern Mexico in search of work so they could provide for their family. 15 of us from First Presbyterian Church spent several nights living with families in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico.

We learned that there was a time, when this land was their land first, and there was no border and people migrated freely, back and forth as the work and seasons allowed.

As I listened to their stories, I could not help but think of my father’s immigrant parents who had fled poverty, hunger and violence in Sicily, crossing an ocean in search of a similar promised land.

“Now the Lord said..., ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’”

“In late August, 1619, 20-30 enslaved Africans, (who had been captured and forced to leave their nation, their homes and their families) landed at Point Comfort, today's Fort Monroe in Hampton, Va., aboard the English privateer ship White Lion...Several days later, a second ship (Treasurer) arrived in Virginia with additional enslaved Africans. Both groups had been captured by English privateers from the Spanish slave ship San Juan Bautista. They are the first recorded Africans to arrive in England's mainland American colonies.” (<https://hampton.gov/3580/The-1619-Landing-Report-FAQs>)

While we try to tell ourselves that our immigrant ancestors came to America “legally,” we have to remember that in telling our shared story, some

of our nation's ancestors did not come here under their own free will. They were captured, enslaved, forced to endure horrid conditions on slave ships, before being sold as property, enduring violence if they tried to resist their captors. Their stories are interwoven with our stories as is the the Church's story. Yes, the Church had a role to play in this horrific part of our nation's story, with many clergy owning slaves themselves while distorting the Bible to support chattel slavery, allowing for systemic racism to still impact our economy, society and churches today.

At the same time as God's people were being brought to America and sold as slaves, the first citizens, the original peoples of this land, were being forced from their land and made to migrate to new places, or killed if they did not go or rebelled against our ancestors.

"In the 1830s, the Trail of Tears was the forced and brutal relocation of approximately 100,000 indigenous people (belonging to Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole, among other nations) living between Michigan, Louisiana, and Florida to land west of the Mississippi River. Motivated by gold and land, Congress (under President Andrew Jackson) passed the Indian Removal Act by a slim and controversial margin in 1830. The Cherokees resisted removal through every possible means...The Cherokee Nation rejected the Treaty of New Echota. As a result, between May 1838 and March 1839, federal soldiers and state militia rounded up 16,000 Cherokees from Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, and North Carolina, taking them to stockades, and forcing them to get on boats and then march to Indian territory, present-day Oklahoma. At least 4,000 Cherokees died—one quarter of the population—and many were buried in unmarked graves. This devastating chapter in American history is known as the Trail of Tears."

Our own land, the very land OCPC was first built on at the shores of Lake Ripley, and where our building and community sits today, was not originally ours. It was the ancestral land of the Ho-Chunk people, a place their nation has called Teejob (day-Jope) since time immemorial. In an 1832 treaty, the Ho-Chunk were forced to cede this territory.

"Decades of ethnic cleansing followed when both the federal and state government repeatedly, but unsuccessfully, sought to forcibly remove the Ho-Chunk from Wisconsin." (Brian Ward - MHS teacher)

We are a nation of immigrants, yes, and not all people wanted to migrate here or even leave the land that their people had lived on for generations.

"Now the Lord said: "Go from your country and your family and your family's home to the land that I will show you..."

In telling the story of our immigrant ancestors, we must remember that the only way to honestly tell our stories is to remember, ours is a migrant faith story.

Starting with Abram and Sarai, who taken on different names in a new land, as many of immigrant ancestors did when they came to this country.

Joseph was sold into slavery, and then his family migrated into Egypt, then when the political power changed, they were treated as slaves, before God heard their cries, and lead them over a river, through the wilderness, and across borders into a new land. Even Jesus and his parents were political refugees, crossing borders to find safety.

We are an immigrant people, wandering through this life, moving across borders, rivers and seas, following God's promise of a new land, a land of peace and safety, of hope in search of our common home in God.

This is the story we love to tell, though we often forget some or all of it. The people of faith who migrated before us, did as well. This is why God is constantly reminding our faith ancestors and us still today, to treat the alien/stranger/immigrant "residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were immigrants/strangers/new comers once yourselves."

My fellow immigrants, we do have a story to remember and tell and it goes something like this:

The fallen immigrants are without faces.  
Their names blown away the wind and their bodies  
swallowed by the desert.

The sinister outcome of their death does not  
frighten statistics,  
Nor does it surprise humanity.

Nor is there a single tear shed  
by the cold eye of the world.

No one is moved by this heroism of men and women,  
of children, of elderly,

Whose only sin was to dream of crossing  
A border, a desert, a river, a sea

In search of a promised land

And not find it but in the world beyond.

Translated from Spanish to CCAMYN Shelter in Altar, Sonora, Mexico.

Amen