"In Praise of Our Ancestors"
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
February 25, 2018

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Mark 8:31-38

I greet you in the name of God Almighty and in the name of our common ancestors of faith, Abraham and Sarah. For we are from the "multitude of nations" God promised would come forth from Abraham and Sarah. Whether descendents by birth, or descendents by faith, we are some of the fruit God promised in God's covenant with them. One tradition of the Lunar New Year is to hold a feast at the end of the New Year celebrations in praise of your ancestors, so today I ask that we include Abraham and Sarah in the ancestors we honor.

When God made a covenant to Abram and Sarai, God gave them new names: Abram, which means "Father of Height" or "Exalted Father" in Hebrew, became Abraham, which means "Father of Many." And Sarai, whose name shares the same roots as the name Israel, means "she strives" or "contentious" just as Israel means "struggles with God. Sarai becomes "Sarah" which means "princess"-- pointing to the promise that she will become the mother and ruler of nations. And indeed, in the covenant God makes with Abraham and Sarah promised that Sarah would bear a child, even in their old age.

Name changes point to significance in the bible. Jacob becomes Israel; Jesus changes Simon's name to Peter, which means Rock, and tells him "on this rock I will build my church." Saul becomes Paul. And a more

mournful name change is Naomi's in the book of Ruth, who calls herself "Mara," which means bitter, after her husband and sons have died.

Many of you who have journeyed to the United States from other countries have also chosen a new name. Elder Fumio Ito, who is our liturgist today, is known in many circles as Mike. Most have chosen a new name out of convenience more than out of spiritual significance, to accommodate Americans with clumsy tongues who are slow to learn Asian names. I want to remind you that though it may take several tries, I think most of us in the church are happy to learn your birth name if that is what you prefer.

I was talking yesterday to someone who grew up Roman Catholic, and I understand that Catholics, when they get confirmed, are asked to take on a new saint name. My friend explored all the possibilities in the book of saints when she was heading toward her confirmation. But she was a sassy seventh grader, and not even sure if she wanted to be confirmed. The name that jumped out at her, with dramatic flourish, was "Cleopatra." The stern nun informed her that Cleopatra would not be appropriate and made her pick a new name. She settled instead on Claudia.

Names have power and meaning. Jung Young Lee says, "In East Asian tradition, we do not give a child a name because the name sounds good or familiar to us. When a baby is born, we must give arduous care and thought to naming him or her. It takes a long and serious consultation with relatives and friends, and, in many instances, with professionals, in order to find an appropriate name. Naming itself is regarded as a sacred event in the family. If the name means righteousness, one who bears that name must be righteous for life. When the name does not substantiate his or her character, the name has to be changed even in later years."[1]

Have any of you noticed that for the past month the words of the last line of the Doxology have changed from "Praise Father, son and Holy Ghost" to

---

[1] Jung Young Lee, *The Trinity in Asian Perspective* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996

the more gender inclusive "Creator Christ and Holy Ghost?" Now, I know some of you are stubborn and you're going to sing what you're going to sing. You may say: this is what my ancestors sang; Father was their name for God, and if it was good enough for them, it is good enough for me! But consider as a spiritual practice trying this more expansive version of God's names, for even in the bible we find a richness of variety of God's names, and all of them bear significance. We can go back to our ancestor Abraham, who was told when The Lord appeared to him, "I am God Almighty. Walk before me…" The Hebrew name, *El Shaddai*, gets translated in our bible as God Almighty, but it doesn't actually mean that. A closer reading of the Hebrew would translate as God of the Mountains, or even-- since the Hebrew word *shadayim* means "pair of breasts"-- God of the Breasts.[2] Valerie Bridgeman Davis writes of the significance of this name, "given that Sarah's breasts are dry from never having a child, and she and Abraham are about to be promised prolific progeny,"[3] descendants as numerous as the stars.

And we do get to claim them as our ancestors. Though it may be hard to trace our lineage through blood, in Jesus we have assurance that we become descendants by faith. When Jesus in Mark asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" they tell him of names of ancestors: the recent ancestor John, Jesus' cousin who was beheaded, and the much earlier ancestors Elijah and other prophets. But Peter answers Jesus with a new name: "You are the Messiah." Messiah means "anointed one," as in a king. Clearly this is a powerful name, so powerful that Jesus commands Peter to say no more as Jesus goes on to tell of what will happen to him: great suffering; execution; and a resurrection after three days. "Take up your cross and follow me," Jesus tells them, as he foreshadows his own execution on a tree.

---

[2] Biale, David (1982). "The God with Breasts: El Shaddai in the Bible". *History of Religions*.
[3] Valerie Bridgeman Davis, *New Proclamation Year B* (2009)

This cross, or tree, we are left with has become the dominant symbol of what Christianity is about. It has become our family tree, if you will.   But we would be misguided if we were to read this as an encouragement from Jesus to participate in suffering *as* our path to redemption. Instead, Jesus calls us to bring to him our crosses as we follow him: bring our suffering, our pain. Bring our brokenness and despair. Bring our experiences of oppression and our laments at the world's shortcomings.   For these are experiences Jesus has come to know too. These are experiences where God, through Jesus, can work the most transformative power.

During Lent, we explore our human limits. We come to know our hungers. We acknowledge our brokenness. We wrestle with our human frailty and even death, as Jesus did. We recognize the limits of our lives, as we grapple with the reality that we one day will die and wonder what our legacy will be and what might live beyond our bodies, and we try not to be afraid of it but the truth is that many of us are. In Lent we explore the contours of our human limits and stretch to know their farthest reach. This stretching prepares us for that Easter explosion, when the earthly limits as we know burst open *and all is **life.***

LIke Sarah and Abraham found, the abundance of God meets the limits of our bodies with generosity. In my ministry I have heard confessions from a few of how hard it is to enjoy-- let alone even want-- sex in older age. That's why Sarah laughed. But with the abundance of God, we find old people not just having sex, but as Sarah laughed, "have pleasure" again.

You don't have to be giving birth in your 90's to know this generative power God can bring. It is here in our our church. As people who have known the limits of their own tongues as they have wrestled with languages and cultures unfamiliar have found a welcome that expands the limits of nation and speaks the language of friendship we find as brothers, as sisters, as siblings united in Christ.

Think again of the image of a tree. Think of the ancestors of blood, and of faith, who connect you to your family tree. Think of the scars on that tree: scars of suffering and loss, of regret and redemption. My friends in faith, you who share with me in the ancestry of Abraham, of Sarah, of Jesus. Today, I tell you: you are the blossoms that will bring forth the fruit God promised in covenant made with our ancestors long, long ago.

Silence my soul, these trees are prayers. I asked the tree, "Tell me about God." Then, it blossomed. -**Rabindranath Tagore**