Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Seventh Sunday of Easter

May 13, 2018

Neal MacPherson

BELONGING Isaiah 52:1–8

John 17:6–19

*Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness,*

*you that seek the Lord,*

*Look to the rock from which you were hewn*

*and to the quarry from which you were dug.*

*Look to Abraham your father*

*and to Sarah who bore you;*

*for he was but one when I called him,*

*but I blessed him and made him many. —*Isaiah 52:1–2

This is a beautiful, poetic passage from the Book of Isaiah, which is appropriate for today, it being Mother’s Day, for it mentions not only “Abraham your father” but also “Sarah who bore you.” Through the voice of the prophet, God urges the people of Israel, in their Babylonian exile, to remember and look back, not back to their more glorious past, as when King Solomon reigned and the Jerusalem temple was built, but to their ancient past, to the rock from which they were hewn and the quarry from which they were dug, back to Abraham their father and Sarah, the mother who bore them.

I think there may be a lesson here for us. In our own kind of exile, when we cannot help but worry about our future as a community of faith, perhaps we too need to look not to our more recent past, to the 50’s and 60’s and 70’s when our membership was double what it is today, and when there were lots of families with children and teenagers occupying the pews, but to our more distant past, to those courageous, faithful fathers and mothers who founded this community of faith, not quite knowing where God would lead them.

We cannot help but remember the early years of our church and people such as Yeiko Mizobe So who not only adopted Esther, her daughter, but who was also mother to hundreds of abused women who sought shelter in the Japanese Women’s Rescue Home she founded, and mother to the children who were cared for in the Home for Neglected Children, which she also founded. In Mrs. So we have our own Sarah to whom we may look for inspiration and courage and hope.

Abraham and Sarah and Yeiko So had one thing in common. They were people of faith. They knew to whom they belonged. They belonged to the God who called them to venture forth and do things that defy the imagination. Abraham heard God’s call and by faith journeyed toward a land that God would show him. By faith, Sarah became the mother of an entire people. By faith, Mrs. So fulfilled her ministry among the least of God’s children.

It wasn’t that they were perfect. Mrs. So must have had her moments of doubt and her times of struggle. And yet we remember her for her faith. We remember Abraham for a faith so strong that the Apostle Paul would use him as an example for our own faithfulness. But Abraham had his shortcomings. Walter Brueggemann describes him as a “pitiful figure of helplessness and fear, lying to save his skin, seeking a surrogate wife to get an heir, so unsure, so bewildered, so barely faithful.”[[1]](#footnote-1) And as for Sarah, she was a promise carrier. But Brueggemann suggests that we also remember her for “her oldness, her barenness, her helplessness, her mocking laughter, her inability to receive the promise future.” But God used her to bring about a “newness against all the evidence, in the face of deathly circumstance.” Through their remembrance of her, the people of Israel in exile were to look in faith to a new beginning:

*For the Lord will comfort Zion;*

*he will comfort all her waste places,*

*and will make her wilderness like Eden,*

*her desert like the garden of the Lord;*

*joy and gladness will be found in her,*

*thanksgiving and the voice of song.* —Isaiah 51:3

These founders of faith were far from perfect, but they were faithful. We think of our own mothers, and fathers, too. None of them were perfect. I think of my own mother. She was a pastor’s wife, and as such in the kind of small town culture in which she lived, she was expected to live a certain way and do certain things in the church and in the community. Our town was situated in the center of an apple growing area in Nova Scotia, and every year itinerant hobos would come into town to look for work picking apples. They carried a handmade map of the town that indicated the various parsonages and where they were located. The hobos knew that they could receive a free meal at each of the parsonages. My mother would look out the kitchen window and if she saw a hobo approaching the house, she would groan loudly and say, “O dear, here comes another one.” But then she would proceed to stop whatever she was doing and make a lunch for the stranger, and not just an ordinary lunch, but one consisting of homemade brown bread, and a jar of hot homemade soup, and a dessert, whatever what was on hand. And she would invite the hobo to enjoy his lunch, not in the kitchen (that would have been a little too much), but in the entryway leading into the kitchen. Even though she complained about what she was called to do, I remember her as a person of great faith. She learned how to be faithful from her own mother, my grandmother. Grandmother Porter also baked brown bread every week, and even in her eighties she would then deliver loaves to her neighbors. She too was a woman of great faith. She knew to whom she belonged.

I think that many us have learned about faithfulness from our own mothers, or from those who have been mother to us. They all knew to whom they belonged. They belonged to God and to Christ.

And so when we are weary and heavy-laden, when we experience our own kinds of exile, when we find ourselves out of sorts with the world, we too can look to those whom we remember, our own mothers and grandmothers and those who have been mother to us—our own Sarah’s, as it were.

Jesus, in this morning’s reading from John’s Gospel, in his prayer to God just before his departure from the world, says something very important about the life of his disciples. He says that they will find themselves “in” the world but not “of” the world.

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that

they may be sanctified in truth. —John 17:14–19

I don’t know about you, but these days I am feeling more and more out of sorts with the world. I feel that I do not belong to the world. It’s not only President Trump that is making me feel that way. It’s also the loss of civility in our society. It’s the greed and the injustices suffered by women and the poor and the immigrant. It’s hearing that the government intends to separate children from their South American parents who are seeking entry as refugee immigrants into our county. It’s the desecration of the natural world. I’m just feeling more and more that I do not belong to the world.

But then I remember Abraham and Sarah and Mrs. So and my own mother and grandmother, and I recall their faith. They were in the world, to be sure, but they also knew that they belonged not to the world, but to God. In them there was the sense that they were not “of” the world. They belonged to God and God’s kingdom. It was their faith that moved them, imperfect as they were, to place their trust in God’s leading. As I remember them, my own faith is kindled and my own hope renewed.

The present arrangements in the world seem to speak of something other than the Kingdom of God. My brothers and sisters, let us not allow the world to defeat us. We cannot simply give up and resign ourselves to our present circumstances in the world. We remember those who have gone before us, our Abrahams and our Sarah’s and how they lived by faith and not by sight. And then, remembering them, our own spirits are revived as we place our trust in the God to whom we belong and who, even now, is with us and for us and who will be with us and for us forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)