

Power as a Blessing—Genesis 17: 1-8, 15-16
(February 25, 2024-2nd Lent)

I'm glad for the [video](#)¹ we just watched. We need stories of movement. of momentum on the anti-racist journey. So, while we shouldn't be too self-satisfied, it is important to recognize, to point out movement. For example, I think of Paul Knowles standing up last week and talking about how attending Parkminster has better prepared him to attend a conference on Indigenous tourism as a listener. I thank Paul for sharing that with us. We need these stories to sustain us when the road to justice seems so long. As Maedith (Radlein) says (in the video) these initiatives are like drips of water on a stone, small actions that collectively have great impact. For me, this anti-racist journey has changed how I read and listen to scripture. I can no longer read the stories of our faith without using the lens of power.

Here's the thing about the scripture today and others like it, that speak of the covenant between God, the patriarchs of Israel and the promise of a land for the Hebrew people, a land that was already inhabited. I can't read these scriptures without thinking about what's going on in that part of the world today and for many years before. I focus here on Israel because of the use of this shared scripture between our two faiths. Scriptures like these have been used as justification for Israel's expansion of settlements into lands whose ownership is unresolved. We've heard senior Israeli politicians invoke such scriptures to justify the brutality currently taking place in Gaza. The scriptural injunction is that Israel has a right to the land promised them by God.²

But Abram and Sarai, as we meet them, are stateless nomads. They are vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the powerful without a kingdom to call their own. Today in that area of the world it is the plight of Palestinians that more closely resembles the plight of Abram and Sarai and the yearning for the promise of a land to call their own.

This mix of theology and politics illustrates the danger of reading and applying scripture removed from its context. It also illustrates the danger of not applying a power analysis to scripture, of asking who are the powerful and who are the powerless and how does that translate to today? Israel and Palestine isn't the only situation where we've seen this play out historically. We've seen it in Canada with the Church's involvement with Indigenous residential schools, in the United States with scriptural justifications for the enslavement of African peoples. Pretty much all Western colonialism is fueled and legitimated by an edict from the Pope in the fourteen nineties which has its basis in the scriptural injunction to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28: 19-20). Whereas that first evangelist, Paul, spread the gospel from a position of weakness,

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHFuLnYAS_w

² Dr. Tomer Persico, *The Movement That Saw Israeli Settlements as Redemption for Jews and the World: The rise and fall of Zionism as a religion*, **Haaretz**, June 22, 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-the-rise-and-fall-of-zionism-as-a-religion-1.5486927>.

offering the story of Jesus as a means of liberation from Rome, the white western church imposed that same story from a position of power to enslave and indenture.

This doesn't mean that individuals, groups, and societies that hold power can't be faithful people, it just means that the more power we possess the more intentional we must be about getting in touch with our powerlessness and placing ourselves in the web of human relationships and the interconnectedness of creation. In traditional Christianity we've called that, submitting our lives to a God's will, to Love. For example, the more power we possess, the more intentional we must be about grounding our lives in gratitude. In gratitude we realize how much of what we have and what we are is not of our doing, so much is gift. The more intentional we must be at realizing the people who've gotten us where we are and continue to support and sustain us and our endeavours, not only in gratitude but to realize our interconnectedness. The more intentional we need to be about connecting to nature, seeing ourselves as part of creation not set apart from it, seeing the grace that sustains our living. The more intentional we must be about being open to stories and experiences that differ from our own so that we can hear, see, and feel that sacredness manifests in all people, that the image of God is imprinted in every soul and that power and wealth are not signs of holy favour.

Lent is our yearly reminder that Christianity is rooted in powerlessness, not power. What else is the journey to Jerusalem and the cross about. Any attempt to connect the message of Jesus to coercive, manipulative power is heresy. There's no other word for it. Power demands that it be defended and protected, making it very difficult to be open to Love's promptings and calls. We can never use the bible to justify injustice.³

The promise of God given to Abraham and Sarah is that one day their descendants will no longer wander rootless, isolated, and fearful. One day their descendants will have a home and a sense of belonging. If you go back in Genesis, to the 12th chapter, this promise has a holy purpose, "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." The power of nationhood is to be a blessing to others.⁴ Perhaps that's why throughout the Hebrew scriptures Israel is reminded to never forget, "that you were strangers in a strange land." Never forget what it was like.

Our utility to God in being a blessing to others is tied to remembering and living through our powerlessness. Which I need to add, is made so much harder for Israel by antisemitism and the ultimate expression of that hatred, the memory of the holocaust. This is part of the tragedy in the Middle East right now, a people whose powerlessness was brutally taken advantage of, running as fast as they can away from that memory and into the false security of authoritarian power.

³ Zahnd, Brian, *A Christian Perspective On the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, <https://brianzahnd.com/2015/03/christian-perspective-israeli-palestinian-conflict/>, March 28, 2015.

⁴ Zahnd

It's not easy, this journey into powerlessness. The Lenten and the anti-racist journey ask us, in the words of a wise woman, for commitment and fortitude, to not be tempted by fear and ego, to not strive after the power that separates, isolates, and dominates. Friends, let's commit together, supporting and uplifting one another in letting faith guide us on the path of powerlessness, the path of Jesus. That we might be a blessing to our families, our communities, our world.

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