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The Promised Land

Philippians 3:20

During my renewal leave travels in 2005 I discovered that I had ancestors who were Marian exiles. I immediately began reading whatever I could find on this period of English history. I discovered that when Mary I became Queen of England in 1553 she set out to reverse the Protestant Reformation in England. Protestant leaders were removed from church positions. Many were incarcerated and more than 300 were burned at the stake. About 800 Protestant leaders fled to various cities on the European Continent to escape from this persecution. They became known as the Marian exiles.

My ancestors went to Frankfurt, a German city which was then part of the Holy Roman Empire. The exiles in Frankfurt invited the Scottish reformer John Knox to be their pastor. Knox had fled from his pastorate in Berwick, England and was happily situated in Geneva. This was his opportunity to learn from John Calvin and he was not inclined to accept the invitation to go to Frankfurt. But Calvin encouraged him to accept the call so he did. When Knox arrived in Frankfurt he found the English exiles embroiled in controversy. They were fighting over the order of service to be used in worship. Some wanted to use the Protestant order written for the Church of England by the Protestant Archbishop Thomas Cranmer. Others wanted to use a service that more closely followed the one Calvin used in Geneva. While John Knox favored Calvin's service he tried to mediate between the two factions. Despite his best efforts the conflict continued to spin out of control. The accounts of this controversy remind me of some of the Presbytery meetings that I have suffered through. I never cease to be amazed at the way people who agree on 98% of the issues can argue endlessly about the 2% on which they do not agree and seem incapable of compromise.

In the end, Knox was forced to leave Frankfurt when one of the factions fed unfavorable information about him to the city magistrates. In her biography of John Knox, Rosalind Marshall summarized what happened in Frankfurt in these words:

Knox's months in Frankfurt had been worrying, irritating, and frustrating. Diplomacy never was his strong suit, but he had tried hard to be patient and tolerant and he had really gone to extraordinary lengths to appease his adversaries and achieve some form of compromise. It was hardly his fault that he did not succeed. Calvin was shocked when he heard what had happened, and in May 1555 wrote to exiles in Frankfurt declaring, 'Mr. Knox was, in my judgment, neither godly nor brotherly dealt with.' It would have been better if the exiles had stayed in England rather than bringing the 'firebrand of cruelty' to destroy all those who opposed them (Rosalind K. Marshall, *John Knox*, page 86).

Under the pressure of persecution and separation from home and family these exiles had forgotten who they were. Their grasping for control and power was an expression of their failure to live by God's grace. Calvin wrote to remind them that they belonged to God.

In the 15th chapter of Genesis we find Abraham and Sarah struggling with the same issue. By the standards of their society they were not a successful couple. They had neither property nor children. But God invites Abraham and Sarah to live by a new identity which is grounded not in the standards of this world but in the grace of God. God promises that Abraham and Sarah will be the parents of a great nation which will bless all the peoples of the world. God invites them to set out on a journey to this promised land.

Abraham and Sarah accept this covenant with God and they begin their journey in faith. But before they have traveled very far they begin to forget who they are. When they travel through Egypt Abraham loses sight of God's promise and tries to seize control of a threatening situation. Anxious that Pharaoh may interfere with their journey, he announces that Sarah is not his wife but his sister. Abraham is securing his own safety by putting his wife at risk. Sarah has a similar problem later when she sends her handmaid Hagar to Abraham so that they can hurry up and have an heir. In both cases they are scheming to get for themselves what God has promised to provide. In our passage for today we find Abraham complaining to God that the promised land is still out of reach. He demands to know when God will deliver on the promise. God responds by solidifying the promise through a covenant making ceremony. It takes Abraham and Sarah their whole lives to figure out that God's promises are sure. But even when they forget who they are, God is faithful still. In the end they know that they belong to God. That is what the promised land is all about.

This is the message which Paul offered to the Philippian church. In the third chapter he urges these early Christians to remember who they are. He challenges them to move beyond their self-indulgent efforts to control every aspect of their lives. He uses the concept of citizenship to remind them that they belong to God. Paul and his contemporaries were part of the Roman Empire which was assimilating the tribes and nations of the world under a single umbrella. The privileged class were those who held Roman citizenship. Soldiers and administrators moved around the empire but their citizenship was on the registry in Rome. Paul himself was on that registry. But Paul wants the Philippians to value another kind of citizenship. He tells them that they are citizens of heaven. That is where their names are kept. That is the never ending reservoir of grace which will sustain them on their journeys.

The French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupery is best known as the author of *Le Petite Prince* (*The Little Prince*). As a pilot flying mail runs in North Africa during the 1920s he became friendly with some of the local Bedouin. These were men who knew how to survive in the desert. On one occasion he flew some of them with him for a visit to France. He expected that they would be impressed by the miracles of Western technology. He took them to the Eiffel Tower. He arranged for them to ride in trains and automobiles. All these things were new to them but they were not impressed. It was not technology but nature which generated within them a profound sense of wonder. When they visited a waterfall in the French Alps they could not believe that the water never stopped. Their existence had been defined by the scarcity of water. They had measured their lives by what their canteens could hold and the distance from one oasis to the next. Saint-Exupery described their response in these words:

They stood in silence. Mute, solemn...gazing at the unfolding of a ceremonial mystery. That which came roaring out of the belly of the mountain was life itself...The flow of a single second would have resuscitated whole caravans that, mad with thirst, had pressed on into the eternity of salt lakes and mirages. Here God was manifesting Himself: It would not do to turn one's back on God (Antoine de Saint Exupery, *Wind, Sand, and Stars*, quoted by Carols Wilton, *Journal for Preachers*, Lent, 2007, page 44).

The Bedouin had arrived at the promised land, where God's grace never runs dry. It is here that we stand in silence overwhelmed by the truth that we belong to God.