

Last week we started again to read the Bible from front to back. This is now the third time Peace is using the Narrative Lectionary, a cycle of Bible readings for the Sundays from September through May. Each year the texts follow the entire Biblical story, from Creation through the early Christian church. The readings invite us to hear the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and the prophets, Jesus, and Paul all with the goal of connecting faith and daily life—to see our story as part of God’s story.

To read through scripture in 9 months means we hear about forty total stories which is a lot but there are many more really good stories that we’ll skip over. One way to not miss anything is to read at home the parts we don’t read in worship. You would know what to read because all of the readings are printed in the monthly newsletter and come out in the weekly PEACEmail.

Last week we read parts of the second Creation story, in Genesis chapter 2. Today we read Genesis chapter 15. That means we skipped over the Flood story, the Tower of Babel story, and in Chapter 12, the Call of Abram and Sari who become Abraham and Sarah. In chapter 12 God makes them three promises: land, blessing and that they will be parents of a great nation. In today’s reading in chapter 15 Abraham is reminding God, about the promises God made; God is promising to be faithful to the yet unfulfilled promise.

Just over two months ago my family and I were in Norway. With a name like Kjell you might guess I have Norwegian roots and while in Norway we were able to

see the soil those roots were from. I didn’t know much about where my great-grandfather was from but we knew the town—Gaupne in the district of Luster. When we were here in Minnesota it seemed like it would be a grand accomplishment to just get to the town so when we turned our rental car off of one small road onto a smaller one in the little town, I pulled the car to the side of the road and we sat there in a moment of silence then Heidi looked at me and asked, “Now what?” A fair question that I hadn’t fully thought about but I had seen an old church on Google Maps in the town so I announced, “We drive to the church.” With only a vague sense that the church was up the hill we started making right turns then left turns taking what ever road seemed to go up hill more and after about 60 seconds, it was a small town, the road opened into small farms and the church came into view.

As we pulled upto the church a woman in her late sixties had just finished tending the flowers in the grave yard. She spoke some English so I was able to convey that my great-grandfather, Ole Bjorn Svangstu, lived here until 1896. She said a few more things in Norwegian, I thanked her and she hopped on her bike headed back to town. Heidi and the girls joined me as we opened the gate and walked up the steps to the graveyard. The girls fanned out admiring the beautiful old gravestones and unfamiliar flowers. I looked down at the names and realized I was surrounded by my ancestors. Gravestone after gravestone was marked Svangstu dating back hundreds of years. I slowly walked reading their names. I stopped and looked up the steep walls of the fjord and then out to the water with the rushing sound of a glacial stream filling my ears and then it hit me—did my great-

grandfather stand here as he was leaving his home, quite possibly for good, did he stop by the church, did he look out over the town and fjord, walk amongst gravestones, did he pause to breath in the air, to take in the view, to savor the rushing of the stream. I wonder if my great-grandfather Ole felt a little bit like Abraham and Sarah, did a promise draw him out.

What is it like to follow a promise? Think back in your life when have you ventured out, with only a promise. Maybe a first day of school as you look back one last time at mom or dad. Maybe taking off at the airport for an adventure. Maybe it was a new venture at work or leaving a position. Maybe it was an illness and you were following the promise of restored health. Remember that feeling. For my great-grandfather his mother had died when he was five, he was now sixteen and his father had recently passed away and he had no land to inherit. What is it like to go out with only a promise?

Abraham stood there in the tent, it had been years since God's promise and the promise had not been fulfilled and Abram said, "God, what will you give me, we have no child, the closest thing we have is a slave born in our house." What was the tone in Abram's voice? What was he feeling? Do you think he was doubting the promise, scared and angry? As I stood there in that church graveyard I was overwhelmed by a feeling, a feeling as if from a long time ago. A feeling of connection to my great-grandfather, a connection to his fear, his fear over a yet to be fulfilled promise. The story of Abraham and Sarah plays out again and again. We know not knowing.

Abraham's experience and the promise don't align. What does it take when God's promise—being part of a great nation, life and vitality; the promise of a great future—seems so distant from your present reality that it seems so profoundly limited. God's response isn't practical like, "Don't worry you'll have one child to carry on your name." No, God's promise will not be held captive to our imaginations, to human practicality. The magnitude of God's promise explodes beyond Abraham. God is calling Abraham and Sarah to participate in the bringing about of a future beyond what they can imagine.

God walks Abraham outside and turns his head to the skies saying, "I am faithful. Count the stars, if you can, this is how many your descendants will be." And something about the promise and the one promising makes belief possible. That is the life of faith. The promises of God pull us outside of ourselves and then we live in the promises. Jesus loves you. All of your doubt and anger and stupidity and forgetfulness and over indulgence are taken over by God and you are left with the promise of abundant life, joy, grace upon grace. Where is that love leading you? It was crazy for Abraham and Sarah to believe. What is crazy for us? What seems too big, too audacious? Where is the promise leading you? Where is the promise leading us? Amen.