Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 9A – Sunday 05 July 2020 – Webex

You know those genealogies in the Bible that none of us ever read?

-----

Those lists in which one unpronounceable name begets another, generation after generation?

-----

Well, biblical lineages and family connections do have something of a purpose in trying to put things into context.

----- -----

Not enough of a purpose to actually read them on a regular basis, perhaps, but a purpose nonetheless.

-----

For example, let’s consider how we got to where we are today’s reading.

----- -----

There was this city called Ur of the Chaldeans, which is located in modern-day Iraq.

-----

“Chaldeans” was the collective name for a group of Aramaean tribes who were relative latecomers into the Assyria/Babylonia domain.

-----

They were a Semitic-speaking people – as a little tangent here, “Semitic” languages stem from an afro-asian group which today includes Arabic and Hebrew – they were a Semitic-speaking people known in their time for their proficiency in astrology and witchcraft, and for being “freebooters” – pirates or lawless adventurers.

-----

Anyway, in this Chaldean city, into this collection of tribal groups, a man named Terah was born.

-----

When Terah was 70 years old, he became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

-----

Haran died early, but not before he had at least two children – a son, Lot, and a daughter, Milcah.

-----

Milcah married her uncle Nahor.

----- -----

Don’t blame me, I’m just reporting the news.

----- -----

At some point, for reasons unknown, Terah up and left Ur.

-----

When he left, his grandson Lot went with him, as did his son Abram, and Abram’s barren wife Sarai.

-----

They were headed to Canaan, but after traveling a few hundred mile to the north-northwest, following the Euphrates river, they settled in a place they called Haran, after Terah’s deceased son.

----- -----

Now the Bible does not make it clear exactly how, when, or why, but apparently Nahor and the rest of the family ended up in the Haran area too, although, as one might suspect at this point, their specific location was named Nahor.

-----

Terah died in Haran at the age of 205.

----- -----

Meanwhile, a god named Yahweh had come into Abram’s life, made him a bundle of promises, changed his name to Abraham, and told him to leave Haran and continue the journey to the originally intended destination of Canaan – modern day Palestine – a few hundred miles to the south-southeast.

-----

And Abraham did so.

-----

After making it to Canaan, a whole bunch of really, really important stuff happened, including the events we read about two weeks ago and last week: the birth of Ishmael, Abraham’s son by an Egyptian slave named Hagar; the birth of Isaac, Abraham’s long-delayed son by his wife Sarah; Abraham’s banishment of Ishmael and Hagar; his near sacrifice of Isaac; and Sarah’s death.

----- -----

Now, I think it is not unreasonable to assume that Isaac might have been a wee bit clinically depressed at this point, what with his father having tried to kill him and his mother dying and all.

-----

But, whatever the reason, he was now 40 years old and unmarried.

----- -----

Given that one of the promises God had made to Abraham all those years ago was that he would have innumerable descendants through Isaac, this fact posed something of a problem.

-----

So Abraham decided to take matters into his own hands and find his son a wife.

-----

Now, of course, there were innumerable eligible Canaanite women around, any one of whom would probably have been delighted to marry into a rich and princely family such as Abraham’s.

-----

But no, Canaanites were “those people,” and Abraham did not want a Canaanite daughter-in-law – he wanted a his son to have a wife with the correct ethnic pedigree, a nice girl from “down home” in Haran.

-----

Well, of course, he could have just put Isaac on a camel and pointed him in the direction of Haran, but no, Abraham did not want Isaac going to Haran to find his own wife, either.

----- -----

No idea what Isaac wanted. Who cares what Isaac wanted? Apparently not Abraham.

----- -----

Anyway, instead of Isaac, Abraham put his major *domo* on a camel and pointed *him* in the direction of Haran, tasking him to find Isaac the right wife and bring her back to Canaan.

-----

As one does.

-----

Now remember that “down home in Haran” is where Abraham’s brother Nahor was still living with his niece-wife Milcah, who by now had borne him eight sons.

-----

One of those sons was named Betheul.

-----

And *Betheul* had a son named Laban – as well as a daughter named Rebekah.

-----

Who, as you just heard, became Isaac’s wife. And was barren. Because that’s just the way things go in this story.

----- -----

I’m on a little roll here now, so we’re continuing on with the genealogy for one more generation.

----- -----

Twenty years after today’s story takes place – and after a lot of prayer – Rebekah gave birth to twins – Jacob and Esau.

-----

The story of *these* two is a *totally* tangled mess, but hey! Guess what! Jacob gets into a pickle and Rebekah sends him back to her brother Laban in Haran …

… where he meets his cousin Rachel, who was, as was her aunt before her, conveniently hanging out at a well.

-----

Jacob falls in love with Rachel and marries her – but only after having been tricked by his uncle Laban into marrying her older sister Leah first.

----- -----

So, here’s the thing.

-----

It is easy to assume we get all the information we need to about the great patriarchs and matriarchs of the faith – the mighty Biblical heroes Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel – in our Sunday school stories.

-----

We know the special nature and status of this family. We know who was obedient and faithful and righteous and right. We know who matters. We know who the good guys are. We know who to honor and revere.

-----

Except . . . well . . . there are those bits and pieces of the story we do not always include. Such as . . .

-----

Abraham came from a tribal group rife with astrologers, witches, and pirates; kept passing Sarah off to other men as his sister, who then decided to make her one of *their* wives; and refused to allow his son Isaac to marry a “racially inferior and therefore morally suspect” Canaanite woman.

-----

His nephew Lot had an incestuous relationship with his two daughters, each of whom gave birth to a son.

-----

Sarah passed her slave Hagar off to Abraham to be used as a surrogate for the child she could not bear herself, and then, when she finally did give birth to Isaac, insisted Abraham send Hagar off into the wilderness to die so Isaac wouldn’t have to share Abraham’s estate with Hagar’s son Ishmael.

-----

Yet it was Hagar, a female Egyptian slave from a foreign religious tradition who, nonetheless, had two personal encounters with Abraham’s God, a God who promised her “innumerable descendants” – the same promise made to Abraham.

-----

And through the keeping of that promise, Abraham’s banished son Ishmael – who Muslims revere as their spiritual father – himself became the patriarch of “many nations” – twelve tribes, matching the twelve tribes of Israel.

-----

Laban, brother of Rebekah, father of Rachel, was a scheming polytheist whose household gods his daughter Rachel stole as she left Haran.

-----

Rebekah deprived her son Esau of this father’s blessing – the guarantee of wealth, success, abundance, and strength – by tricking Isaac into giving it to Esau’s twin, Jacob.

-----

Jacob stole and swindled and cheated and lied his whole life long.

-----

And it was Leah, whose love for Jacob was unrequired – his affection being reserved for her sister Rachel – it was Leah who gave birth to Judah, the forebear of King David, from whose “house and lineage” Jesus of Nazareth would descend.

----- -----

So, what can we make of all this?

-----

Well, we might want to consider how chaotic, messy, uncertain, and dramatic it all is and note that somehow God was able to work through it anyway to create something new and good – not as quickly and easily, perhaps, as if the human beings involved were not for the most part rather selfish and conniving, but able nonetheless.

-----

This could be good news in this chaotic, messy, uncertain, and dramatic time in which we find ourselves.

-----

And we might want to consider how important it is to dig behind the “executive summary” in order to get a more complete sense of our salvation history and its pattern of events, the factors that shaped the situations and actions involved, the realities of life we wouldn’t otherwise have considered.

-----

This could be sound advice in this time when we decide we have “all the information we need” from a tweet, a sound bite, an unexamined set of assumptions, or a prejudice, whether innocent or willfully ignorant.

-----

We might want to consider that we discover a deeper, more complex, not always comfortable but often more relatable nature in these characters when we pay a little more attention to them as human beings with strengths and weaknesses, joys and sorrows, hopes and fears; we might want to consider that as different as we might be from them, we do have things in common, if we are willing to look for and admit them.

-----

This could be an important consideration in these days of treating the people we encounter in the pages of the news or on the streets or at the event or in our Facebook feeds as one-dimensional caricatures instead of complex human beings with whom – as different as we might be – we do have things in common, if we are willing to look for them.

-----

We might want to consider that the “good guys” in this story are not always obvious and unblemished, in spite of what we have been told, in spite of what we uncritically believe.

-----

This could be a helpful reminder in this time of clear lines, divisive rhetoric, and explosive self-righteous indignation, this time in which we automatically assume we are the “good guys” and categorically refuse to believe that the “good guys” might actually be highly flawed; or might even be the undesirable, unloved, ethnically and racially inferior, polytheistic, reviled, oppressed foreign slave girls rejected by the “patriarchs and matriarchs” of honor and renown.

----- -----

The “whole story” of our forebears and ourselves is often difficult to hear and difficult to tell.

-----

But if we claim it as our own, if we want it to matter, if we want to do the best we can to be obedient and faithful and righteous and right, we need to do both – listen and speak. Hear and tell. Amen.