

A Wandering Aramean Was My Ancestor

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Almost exactly eight years ago, our family showed up here at Lethbridge Mennonite Church for our candidating weekend—that lovely low-stress weekend where a church and a potential pastor scrutinize each other out to see if they want to take their relationship to the next level.

Most of the specific details of that weekend in March 2011 have sort of receded into the fog of half-memory.

I remember plenty of meetings and social gatherings. I remember preaching a sermon that was longer than any of the three hundred or so I have preached since (you evidently forgave me my original sin 😊).

But one memory from the weekend that has *not* disappeared into the mists of time is going to a meet and greet at Kevin and Noreen Neufeldt's home and being presented, almost immediately upon arrival with a very odd, surprisingly thick document.

I suspect that many of you have an idea what the document contained. It was, of course, an exhaustive personal genealogy.

(For those who may not be aware, Kevin has a fascination with Mennonite genealogies. He has the software to prove it, if I'm not mistaken. 😊)

This genealogy detailed my seemingly innumerable and often very remote connections to people in the church and demonstrated, I presume, the legitimacy of my Mennonite stock.

There were names and lines and dates going back, I think, to Jesus Christ himself.

I remember, at least for a moment, being taken aback by this document. Was this a joke? Had this church *really* done several centuries worth of background checking on my genetic provenance? Was this normal practice in the Mennonite world?

Was I supposed to say thank you? Was I supposed to read it all? How many Duecks and Klassens and Kornelsons and Reimers can one reasonably be expected to endure?

Laughter quickly overtook this unique candidating moment and it quickly became a humorous part of a very pleasant evening with new friends.

(Naomi chuckled on the way home that Kevin evidently had no luck finding a Mennonite connection to her Japanese-Canadian family!)

A few weeks ago, Kevin was at it again.

Andrew Dyck, a professor from CMU was speaking at our winter retreat. On Saturday morning, Kevin presented Andrew and I with evidence of our connection on the Mennonite family tree, complete with genealogy numbers.

We are, apparently, fifth cousins on my father's side. Andrew's wife Martha is also my fifth cousin through my mother's side. I have the documentation to prove it.

Much as I appreciate Kevin's attention to detail and his abiding interest in the Mennonite story and the genetic connections that bind our strange community together across time and space, his fascination with genealogies is not one that I happen to share.

I'm sorry if this disappoints you. I am glad to be a Mennonite and I appreciate my family history. But I have always been more attracted to the theological than the ethnic and culinary trappings of the word, "Mennonite."

And yet...

Theology cannot so easily be separated from the stories out of which it emerges. What we believe about God, the world, ourselves, has a deep connection to the stories that formed us—to our "ancestors," both biological, social, and spiritual.

This is true far beyond the Mennonite world. It is true for all Christians and for all human beings, whatever they believe.

It's true for the people of Israel.

Where we come from matters. It leaves a deep imprint on how we think, what we believe, and our way of being in the world.

Our ancestry is the soil out of which we take root and grow.

Our OT text on this first Sunday of Lent is not a formal genealogy, but it *is* an intentional look in the rearview mirror on the cusp of a pivotal moment in a people's story.

The Israelites have been wandering in the wilderness for forty years after their flight from the slavery of Egypt.

Now they are finally about to enter the land that was promised to them—a land flowing with milk and honey. Moses sits them all down to remind them of who they are, of the God who has called and delivered them, and of what they are to do when they enter the land.

There are instructions about offering the first fruits of the harvest, about remembering the mighty acts of deliverance of the Lord, and about sharing the goodness of the land with the priestly class of Levites and the foreigners among them.

Each one of these themes—gratitude, memory, generosity—could be a sermon on its own. But my attention was captured by verse 5, which is the title of my sermon:

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...

My first instinct, upon reading this passage, was to romanticize and spiritualize this “wanderer” that the Israelites were being told to remember.

Perhaps they were being encouraged to remember their wandering origin as a metaphor for the pilgrim nature of the spiritual life, or of a commitment to follow the Lord, wherever he leads.

I had fleeting images of a heroic individual off on a noble quest to find themselves and God or complete a heroic quest through exotic lands and amazing discoveries and experiences. Someone like Don Quixote or Frodo Baggins.

But then I considered the specific wandering Aramean that Moses was referring to.

Jacob. *Jacob*.

Jacob, who was fighting with brother Esau before he was even of the womb and who caused his mother Rebekah to wish she were dead.

Jacob who came out clutching his brother's heel and didn't stop grasping for most of his life.

Jacob, whose very name means “He who supplants” (usurps, displaces).

Jacob, who tricked his brother into giving him his birthright and, with the help of his mother Rebekah, deceived his blind father Isaac into giving him the blessing that Esau was due (I often wonder if those who make a great deal of noise about returning to “biblical marriage” or “biblical

family values” have ever read the book of Genesis!).

Jacob who finds himself “wandering” off north and east to Aram (modern day Syria), the land of his uncle Laban, because his brother Esau wants to kill him for stealing what belonged to him.

Jacob who gets a bit of his own medicine from his uncle Laban and ends up being tricked into marrying both of his daughters, Leah and Rachel, despite only wanting Rachel (uncle Laban got a cool fourteen years of cheap labour out of Jacob in the process).

Jacob who used some creative livestock breeding strategies to ensure that his flocks prospered at uncle Laban’s expense and who finds himself “wandering”—i.e., fleeing another unhappy relative—again in the process, this time back toward the land of Canaan.

Jacob who eventually ends up making peace with Laban and, even more impressively (and beautifully), with his brother Esau on the road.

Jacob who stubbornly wrestles a blessing out of God on his wandering way and is given a new name: Israel, “he who strives with God.”

Jacob, who ends up back in the land, receives the blessing and promise of God again.

This is the “wandering Aramean” that the people of Israel are to look back on once they are in the land, once their own wandering comes to an end and they begin to plant and harvest and enjoy the fruit of the land.

(If you want to read up on some of the juicy details I’ve just sketched out, have a look at Genesis 25-35.)

It’s not the most impressive lineage. Jacob has high points in his story, certainly. He has his good qualities.

But he’s also a scheming, swindling, liar who uses other people to get what he wants and who hits the road when his actions come home to roost.

This Aramean was not off on a heroic spiritual quest: most often, he found himself wandering because he’d cheated or hustled someone.

When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall make this response before the Lord your God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...

You shall remember, in other words, that you come from a broken lineage full of strugglers and sinners.

You shall remember that there weren't any special qualities or virtues to commend your ancestors, and yet God chose them, blessed them, delivered them from oppression, and brought you to this point in the story.

You shall remember who you are and where you come from, and you shall give thanks to the God who called you **despite all that** by living lives of gratitude, sacred memory, and justice in response.

It would be great if we could say that Moses' rousing speech on the outskirts of the Promised Land motivated the people to respond appropriately from this point onward—that they would inhabit the land in just this way from that point on.

But we know this isn't how things went.

The *people* of Israel would, in many ways, mimic the *person* of Israel—stubborn, faithful, wrestling, resourceful, obstinate, penitent, sinful, idolatrous, faithful, unjust...

Like the wandering Aramean from which they sprung, their misdeeds would catch up with them, and they would have to leave the land, wandering off into exile and back and off again.

Which makes this the perfect story for us and the perfect story for the First Sunday of Lent.

It's the perfect story for us because most of us look back on our own stories, whether family ancestry or denominational history or our own lives, with some ambivalence.

We see a mixed cast of characters, probably some uninspiring and predictable detours. We quite likely see a litany of sin and struggle with some victories along the way.

We are all wandering Arameans who come from a legacy of wandering Arameans if only because we are all sinners, all prone to pursue self-interest over God and neighbour.

No matter how good your family history might look on paper or might seem in your memory, there are almost certainly some shady characters and some skeletons in the closet along the way. This is true of Mennonite history, Christian history, human history, and your history.

And no matter how terrible your family history might have been—no matter how bad your genetics are, or your upbringing was, no matter how embarrassed you are by what preceded you, no matter how ordinary and unpromising your beginnings might seem—**there is no human story that God cannot use for his redemptive purposes.**

Against all odds, God chooses to move his story along through wandering Arameans.

And this is the perfect story for the beginning of Lent because this season invites us to be honest about ourselves, to look in the mirror and face up to who we really are and where we come from.

To admit that we come from unimpressive stock, that there are no whitewashed saints in our genealogies, whether biological or theological.

To admit that we are sinners in need of rescue.

To acknowledge that we are not as virtuous as we might think—that very often we, like the apostle Paul, know the good we ought to do but don't do it, and do the very thing we know we ought not to do (Romans 7:14-25).

To come to the end of ourselves and admit that salvation is too big a task for us to accomplish. The "Promised Land" that we all long for can only come as a gift.

To repent. And repent again. And repent yet again. To turn from our chains and keep on walking toward the light.

To come back to the grace that is greater than all our sin—all of our stumbling and wandering away from home and back again.

Which brings us, finally and obviously, to Jesus (Jesus is a good place for most sermons to end up).

In our second reading, we are out in the wilderness with Jesus for forty days, watching as he resists the temptations of the devil.

The parallels are unmistakable. The forty days call to mind Israel's forty years.

Jesus did what Israel—the person and the people—could not. He was faithful and obedient. He was the light to the nations that Israel could only be in fits and starts.

Jesus did what Adam and Eve could not, he resisted temptation. He refused to doubt what God had said and to render false worship.

Jesus does for us what we cannot. He emerges from the wilderness, full of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the inbreaking of the kingdom, forgiveness of sin, hope for a new and better way of being human.

He is crucified *by* and *for* all the wandering Arameans who have walked the earth, all of the mixed-up stories and detours and wrong turns, all the unimpressive lineages, biological and

spiritual, that lead to you and to me and to us.

And ultimately, of course, he is raised from the dead, reconciling all things to himself, bringing many sons and daughters to glory.

Jesus does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

And he saves us from the impulse to try to secure our own salvation, to try do enough, believe enough, sacrifice enough, suffer enough, repent enough...

On this First Sunday of Lent, we simply confess our Christian hope in the God who saves.

The God who loves wandering Arameans and Mennonites and every other tribe that has walked the earth.

The God who loves those whose histories are neat and clean and can be plotted seamlessly in a genealogy, and those who are a tangled mess of influences, those who don't even really know where they came, from and those who barely care.

Jesus comes to reveal God as Saviour—*to* all and *for* all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

