

Remembering Who We Are

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the first Sunday in Lent, February 12, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Take a moment and remember your family history. How did your family come to this land? What were the circumstances? How many of us had ancestors who were fleeing persecution? Some of us may know the answers to those questions, but many of us don't know. We've forgotten our history or someone in the family line has failed to keep the memory alive.

"My ancestor was a wandering Aramaean who took his family to Egypt to live..." This is the opening line of an ancient Jewish creed which may well be the oldest confessional statement found in the Bible. At the festival of Thanksgiving, the people of Israel were to bring their offering before the priest and before the Lord their God and recite this creed: "My ancestor was a wandering Aramaean who took his family to Egypt to live."

The reason for this annual recitation of history is obvious. The people of Israel needed to be reminded of their history. In the security of being settled in the promised land, it was easy for Israel to forget their own origins-- to forget that their ancestors were refugees fleeing for their very lives. It was easy for them to treat minorities and immigrants harshly.

But God didn't want Israel to forget. He commanded them to remember their own history. Once every year, as a confession of faith, the people of Israel are to recite their history and remember that they were once strangers and refugees. "Then", the Lord says, "(you) are to rejoice in (or feast on) all the good things the Lord has given you, you and your household and with you the Levite and the alien who lives among you." God wanted

the ancient Jew to share some of their good things with the aliens and refugees in their towns; to treat them as they would have liked to have been treated when they were aliens in Egypt.

But that was for the Jews. What about us? Our ancestors were *not* wandering Aramaeans. My ancestors wandered through the bogs, marshes and northern forests of England, Scotland and Germany. A thousand years ago my ancestors were most likely barbaric pagans. We have a tendency to forget that our ancestors haven't always been Christians. There was a point in time when missionaries brought the Christian faith for the first time to our ancestors.

We Americans are prone to forget this. This has been brought home to me rather forcefully a number of times over the last several years. Last year at Synod School I had dinner with one man from India and another from Palestine. They were both going to speak that night on Presbyterian missions. I foolishly assumed that our Presbyterian missionaries converted them or their families and they were here to express gratitude. I asked them how long their families had been Christians. The Indian looked at me and said, "My family have been Christians for nearly 2000 years. They are members of the St. Thomas church in India which traces its roots back to the Apostle Thomas." I could tell that the Palestinian was irritated by my question when he didn't even look up from his plate to answer me. For nearly 2000 years his family had been a member of the ancient Palestinian Maronite Christian church.

When my church in Kenmore, NY sponsored five Ethiopian refugees I once asked them what their religious background was. They were all from a Christian family. I asked them how long their family had been Christians and one of them, whose name was Samanchu, said, "When your ancestors

were wandering in the forests of Northern Europe worshipping stones and idols, my ancestors were worshipping the Lord Jesus Christ." What a put down! His family had been members of the ancient Ethiopic Coptic Christian church that traces its roots all the way back to the missionary work of St. Philip the Apostle.

I've learned never to assume that Christians from Asia and Africa are recent converts. We forget that the Christian church is an Asian religion and that the Church in Africa for many centuries was a powerhouse of spirituality and service. European Christianity is relatively new.

Our OT lesson helps remind me who I am. My ancestors were wandering pagans. Yours were too. We can call Abraham our Father and Jesus Christ our Savior only because, thank God, by his grace we've been adopted into God's family. ~~We're in the Christian church not by the merit possessed~~ by our ancestors or by ourselves. We've been drawn to God by the graciousness of his love, a love extended to all peoples. It extends to refugees, immigrants, the homeless and resident aliens in our own land. It extends beyond our own land, to the people of Africa, Asia, Central and South America. Because of Christ there is now no distinction between Jew and Greek; Hispanic, African-American or WASP; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows riches upon all who call. For "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved."

To the extent that we open our hearts and country to those who have nowhere to go, we extend an opportunity which was once extended to our own ancestors who came as immigrants to America. To the extent that our offerings are used to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ around the world we extend an opportunity that was once extended to our pagan ancestors to respond to the Gospel, to confess with their lips that Jesus is

Lord and believe in their hearts that God raised him from the dead, and to be saved.

Let us pray : O God, who has made of one blood all nations to dwell on the face of the whole earth, and who sent your Son to preach peace to those who are far off and to those you are near; grant that all people everywhere may seek after you and find you. Bring the nations into your fold, and add those who do not know Christ to your inheritance. Hasten your kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Resources:

The Reverend K. Barker, "My Father was an Alien", Expository Times, August 1985.

John M. Fife, "Remember the Refugee who lives among you", 3rd World Sermon Notes, Vol. V - No.

12.