

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

"Greater Than"

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Genesis 12:1-3, Genesis 50:15-21

If there's one thing about our three-year old daughter Aurélie and how we as parents are raising her, it's perfectly acceptable to be a superhero like Spiderman -- and not just for one day out of the year like Halloween this past weekend. If she likes you, note that I said the opposite: not if you are an enemy, but if she is your friend, she will want to catch you and impress you with her web-slinging skills. As young as she is in life and in her imagination, we try to impress upon her that there are no limits. As parents, even though we glimpse more of what she'll be like at 13 instead of her mere 3 years, we still want her to know and to act as if she can be and do anything "greater than" her ordinary human limits.

In the same way, last weekend in our church calendar, many of us paused to remember the saints who are now in the church triumphant, who shaped us and who through their lives showed us that we can be "greater than" our human limits, because God empowers us to be "greater than" any of what society defines us or the ways that we limit ourselves. Our family also stopped to remember the many people who have gone before us and shown us that their lives were about following, serving, loving God and loving one's neighbors.

In preparing myself for his death and especially in these months after my uncle's death this past January, I often gave thanks to God for his call to ministry and mission service. For many Presbyterians here in the United States and throughout the world, my late uncle was Rev. Dr. Syngman Rhee who served as the Moderator of the General Assembly of the PCUSA. Uncle Syngman's faithfulness in ministry and mission also paved the way for me to find my way in ministry and mission: Going through confirmation as a high school student in a more conservative church that was affiliated with the Presbyterian Church in America, more than a decade later I only learned about the PCUSA when he introduced me to the Young Adult Volunteer program. This introduction came at a time when I was no longer working as a management consultant with Accenture, and instead I sought a career more in line with my international and cross-cultural experiences.

Thinking about that time in my life, as a twenty-something young adult, it was probably the first time that I had the opportunity to reflect on my personal and family history, and how that might intersect with my choice of career. More specifically, I can remember meeting with Young Adult Volunteer site coordinators and finally deciding between serving in Tucson, Arizona and Cairo, Egypt. Both sites provided opportunities to work directly with migrants or refugees.

Around that same time, a particular news story caught my attention and must have helped me to think about the possibilities of working with refugees: several North Korean defectors had crossed over into China and headed to the consulate offices in the hopes of seeking asylum.

It wasn't the first time North Korean defectors made such movements towards better lives, but it was the first time that I connected that story with the story of my mother's side of the family: during the late 1940s, in the years leading up to the Korean War, her family traveled within the Korean peninsula, from North to South Korea in the hopes of arriving at safety and security. In the official language of refugees, her family, like many others, were internally displaced. Too young to walk, too young to remember, my

mother rested on the back of her aunt who insisted that she stay with the family. Too noisy because of her crying, my mother almost did not make it through that journey - had it not been for my aunt.

Several years later, I also learned about another family story connected to North Korea: although my Uncle Syngman had married my aunt and into our family, this story has become our family story. During his younger years, Japanese colonial rule defined my Uncle Syngman's Korean heritage and homeland. His mother sent away him and his brother, after they were kicked out of school because their father was a Christian minister. These two brothers left their family to seek safety and security and a better life. Through many twists and turns along the way, Uncle Syngman left Korea and eventually arrived in the United States, and many years returned to the remaining family members in North Korea.

As I read the story of Abram leaving his family and his homeland against the backdrop of our family stories, I often wonder about what has become of God's promise of blessings and curses and how that has played out in my life today. One of my consistent prayers is that God's blessings might enable me to serve a blessing to many people. I have also come to believe that such blessings can bring about greater transformation through reconciliation, about the God alone who can heal and redeem broken bodies, broken lives, broken relationships, broken families, even broken peace accords. Through these blessings, it is how I opened up my mind and my heart to the many refugees from the Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, many fleeing civil war, religious persecution and famine, while I was living and serving in Cairo, Egypt, as a Young Adult Volunteer.

It's also how I opened my mind and heart up to the son of a political refugee who happened to be serving as a mission volunteer and living in the same house as us Young Adult Volunteers in Cairo, Egypt: During the early 1970s in the South American country of Chile, Juan's father went from serving in the military to serving a life sentence in a matter of months due to the changing political tide. Brought to France without his family by the United Nations, Juan's father began a new life in exile. Returning to Chile again but this time traveling with his family and resettling together in France, Juan's family would begin their lives again. In his younger years, Juan will tell you that his home served as a way station for many of the Chilean families in the process of resettling into a new life in France. In his older years, armed with his guitar Juan traveled throughout Europe and North Africa. In more recent years, Juan moved from France to marry me, this Korean-American woman whom he had met while he was serving as a mission volunteer in Egypt.

After hearing family stories like ours, it is a wonder how God has brought us together to respond to God's calling to serve in mission together. This time, we're moving again, but this time with our daughter, this time in a country in which neither of us has traveled, this time working with individuals and families who are seeking a better life for themselves only to have human traffickers dash their hopes and dreams.

Those of you looking for a definition of human trafficking, here it is: Due to the poverty of their circumstances, many children and adults are working in cities, in countries, under fear, force and coercion, submitting to employers and employment conditions that treat them more like property than the people that they are. Abolished many centuries ago, the Atlantic slave trade no longer exists, but modern slavery still persists in Asia and throughout the world.

With all this talk about Abram, it might sound like that we are overlooking the real-life challenges of social and economic and political systems, not to mention the attitudes of people. Turn on the radio, flip through a newspaper, scroll through your phone or e-reader, and someone - politicians, or would-be politicians- has something to say about crossing borders or closing up borders, something to say about

people who are making way across water and land to find safety and security for themselves and their loved ones.

Still I am curious if this morning's conversation about God and the movement of people, migrants and refugees, might sound differently because of our faithful heritage, because of another forefather in the faith: Let's go back to Joseph, not the father of Jesus, but the favored son of Jacob who sported a multi-colored coat --- this is the same Joseph whose brothers hated him and threatened to kill him, but instead they resorted to selling him as a slave to some traders on their way to Egypt. This is a life story of sibling rivalry and slavery, but more importantly, about God's intentions for good that are "greater than" any brother's plans for evil.

Through the life of Joseph, my hope in God is firm in the face of life-threatening and life-transforming circumstances. Friends in faith, what it might look like for us to believe again that the God who was at work in Joseph's life, is still at work in the world? Can you believe with me that God is still at work, in peoples' homes, in their places of employment, in their prisons, in their desires to be free and reunited with families? I invite you to believe with us, pray with us, cry and have your heart break with us, work with us, that God might bring about healing and redemption "greater than" just one person, but for many Filipinos and Filipinas, for the many Asians who are impacted by migration and human trafficking. This morning, I'm asking you to believe with me again in this God saves and redeems not just one life, but for something that is always "greater than" one person who can serve the "greater good."

In the same spirit of Joseph who proclaims God's intentions for good which are "greater than" any of his brothers' plans for evil, it is the aim of Presbyterian World Mission, to come alongside the work of churches and organizations in the Philippines and throughout Asia, to support and to strengthen their programs for the victims who are impacted by migration and human trafficking. This work goes deeper and further than "rescue efforts" or "decrying the evils of prostitution or child pornography," because it is about human rights: we also seek to address the root causes of poverty and confront cultures of sexual violence against children and women.

Bringing together both Joseph's statement of faith and God's promise to Abram, I invite us towards a common vision of what it means to serve as mission co-workers with us: Let's believe and work towards God's healing and redemption, all of which can begin with our families of origin but also encompasses God's desire to bless many families of the earth.

People of God, let us praise God because who Abram was and how he lived was and still is a testimony to the God who blesses all families of the earth. Let us praise God for who Joseph was and how he lived was and still is a testimony to this very God of his father and his brothers. Who we are as the Chang Lopez family and how we live is a testimony to this very God.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as members and friends of the First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, I pray that who you are and how you live is a testimony to this very God who is "greater than" any single one of us and unto the God who is always seeking the "greater good" of all families of the earth. To the glory of God, Amen.