

## *An Invitation to Change*

by Rev. Joseph Connolly

“No longer shall your name be *Avram* or the exalted ancestor, but your name shall be *Avraham* or *Hamon Goyyim*. [And that is the Hebrew for the progenitor of a multitude of Nations.]” — Genesis 5a.

People often take the word myth to mean “a widely held *but false* belief or idea.” While that is one of the dictionary definitions it is not the first one listed.

The first definition says a myth is ‘a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or a story which explains some natural or social phenomenon.’ Put another way a myth uncovers deep truth, a reality which supersedes mere fact. This definition also says ‘a typically myth involves supernatural beings.’

Indeed and to elaborate, myths are written to give people a vision of their place in the world, help make sense of their existence. Myths give people a narrative in which and by which they can live their lives, help people understand their lives. That type of myth is often called a functional or establishing narrative.

Establishing narratives are not an outdated idea. Even today establishing narratives, establishing myths, influence people to see the world in a certain way.

For instance, Americans see the Revolutionary War as part of our establishing myth. We see that conflict as being about freedom, as well we should. However, we also need to be aware of the realities behind the myth.

For instance, Samuel Adams and John Hancock, both signers of the Declaration of Independence, were the two most wealthy people in America at that time. Someone named George Washington owned more land than anyone else, wealth in terms of land ownership.

Further, British bankers were constantly cutting off the credit lines of people in the colonies. So in part at least, the Revolution was about wealth and credit and debt. Which is to say in order to understand our own establishing myth, the American establishing myth, one needs to also understand the reality involved.

To be clear: the underlying facts I just recited do not in any way diminish that the establishing myth of America is about freedom. However, to ignore the underlying reality as if it did not exist is less than healthy.

I need to add something on a more individual level, something which effects all of us. I would suggest each of us maintains our own, personal, establishing myth or myths.

You have heard me many times address my growing up in the Roman Catholic tradition. You have heard me many times address the fact that in my early childhood I lived in what might be called a tough section of Brooklyn— in the vernacular a ghetto.

*That* is the reality, the fact. But the essence of my establishing myth, my deep truth, says I did not become trapped by the circumstances or the place from which I came.

Further, both fact and myth need to work together. Therefore, the reality, the facts of my story inform my establishing myth, inform the deeper truth found therein. And my establishing myth brings new light to the reality and enables me to see the underlying facts of where I have been in a helpful way.

I also believe fully understanding my myth empowers me to think about where I might go next, who I might

become. I say it informs who I might become because I am convinced God is not yet finished shaping and reshaping me. I believe God beckons me to walk in new ways, in new light, in new hope. (Slight pause.)

We find these words in the work known as Genesis: “No longer shall your name be *Avram* or the exalted ancestor, but your name shall be *Avraham* or *Hamon Goyyim*. [And that is the Hebrew for the progenitor of a multitude of Nations.]” (Slight pause.)

I earlier said a myth is a traditional story which explains some natural or social phenomenon and typically involves supernatural beings. In that sense, every last story in Genesis is a founding story, an establishing myth of the people of Israel. And again, the word myth does not mean the stories are false.

The label ‘myth’ means they convey deep truth, visceral truth, truth about reality, truth about the reality of feelings. For the Genesis stories it also means they convey truth about the reality of relationship, especially a relationship with God.

That brings me to the story of *Avram*, who becomes known as *Avraham* or *Hamon Goyyim*. Now this is one of the stories in Genesis which directly addresses covenant.

It is clearly an establishing myth for the Israelites since God promises make *Avram* (quote:) “...exceedingly, exceedingly many.” And indeed, the Hebrew word is repeated— ‘exceedingly.’ But it is also an establishing myth for a relationship with God. And it is the relationship with God that, I think, gives us moderns reason to pause.

Why? God is clearly in control. We are not in control. (Quote:) “I am God, Almighty.” (Quote:) “Be blameless,” meaning *Avram* is called to be perfect, complete. This is not moral purity. This is about being completely devoted to God in an unqualified way.

Also (quote:) “As for me, here— my covenant is with you:...”— a unilateral action of God. And not once but twice *Avram* and then *Avraham* falls face down in a form of worship.

Of course, the next thing to mention is obvious and in some ways the key point. God, unilaterally, changes the names of *Avram* and *Sari* to *Avraham* and Sarah. For me, this name change poses the pertinent question. To what does God call us? (Slight pause.)

I want to suggest God calls us to change. And the change to which God calls us is to see the world the way God sees the world. And how might God see the world?

I think God sees the world as a place where the possibilities God names astound us in a profound way. (Quote:) “I am a hundred years old. How can children be born to me? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”

Is this about bearing children at a late age? I think not. I think the claim made is God sees the world as a place where the impossible possibility of the realm of God is a real possibility.

And it is a real possibility not just among the Israelites but among all people. Hence, not *Avram* but *Avraham* is to be a (quote:) “progenitor of a multitude of Nations” or *Hamon Goyyim*, the underlying Hebrew sense of the words also applied to *Avraham*. [1]

That meaning is clear. *Avraham* will be a progenitor of all people, all nations, not just the Israelites. And therefore the story is both an establishing myth for Israel but also an establishing myth for humanity in its

relationship with God. (Slight pause.)

Earlier I spoke about establishing myths for nations and for individuals. In fact, most groups have establishing myths.

Question: what is the establishing myth of this congregation, this church. Or, to put that another way, if someone asked you what is the reputation of your church in this community, what would you say? What would your claim be?

Now, there may be a lot of answers to that question. But occasionally when I am at a New York Conference or a regional level meeting another pastor will ask me how the church I serve is known in the community.

I say this: we are known as the church with great music and known for our philanthropy. Hence, my claim is our establishing myths are music and mission.

Now, just as I said earlier about my own personal establishing myths, I would hope naming our establishing myths might bring new light to the reality of who we are. I hope naming our myths might enable us to see the underlying facts of where we have been and where we might be going.

But my naming of the myths of this congregational, as I just did, does not matter as much as the myths that you, the members of this congregation, might name for yourselves. And at least in part, that is what the transition process we are and will be experiencing is about: you naming who we are in an effort to see where we are going— easier said than done. Why do I think that's important?

You see, I am convinced God is not yet finished shaping and reshaping us. I am convinced God beckons us to walk in new ways, in new light, in new hope.

I also believe, just as God called *Avram* and *Sari* to change, God calls us, this congregation, to change. Now, you might ask 'change to what?' I don't know.

But I do know this: God is in control. And we, as a congregation, need to be aware of that, to work with that and, perhaps most important, to let God lead us. Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: "An overarching theme of the Bible is covenant. And covenant, explained in stories of establishing myths, is the whole point of Genesis. But we, humans, are not quite comfortable with covenant. We are not comfortable because the covenant starts with God. God is in control. Indeed, many people talk about how wonderful the grace of God is and yet grace is defined as an undeserved gift. What's amazing is so many people think they have to work for grace— justification by works. But God *is* in control. So, are we comfortable enough with God being in control to let God lead us?"

BENEDICTION: Do not be ashamed to question all that denies God's reign. The promises of God are for all. Let us trust in the promises of God. Let us understand, believe in and hold to God's covenant. Let us depart in confidence and joy knowing that God is with us and let us carry Christ in our hearts. Amen.

[1]

The translation used was adapted from one done by Everett Fox. It was used at this service of worship. The translation uses the Hebrew names and pronunciations of those names found in the story. To be clear, the explanation of the names found in the reading are not a part of the original text. They are offered to help with a better understanding of the writing.

[1] When *Avram*, the exalted ancestor, was ninety-nine years old, *Yahweh* appeared to *Avram*, and said, “I am God, Almighty— or, as it says in the Hebrew, *El Shaddai*, meaning God, the One on the mountain— I am God, Almighty— walk in my presence, and be wholehearted, blameless. [2] And I will set my covenant, make it between Me and you, and will make you exceedingly, exceedingly many.” [3] Then *Avram* fell face down before God and God spoke: [4] “As for me, here— my covenant is with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. [5] No longer shall your name be *Avram* or the exalted ancestor, but your name shall be *Avraham* or *Hamon Goyyim*. (And that is Hebrew for the progenitor of a multitude of Nations.) For I, God, Almighty, have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. [6] I will make you most fruitful, exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you; yes, rulers shall go out from you. [7] I will establish My covenant as an everlasting covenant between Me and you, and your descendants after you throughout their generations to come. I will be God to you and to your descendants after you.

[15] God continued and said to *Avraham*, “As for *Sarai* your wife, she shall not be called *Sarai*, but Sarah, (which is Hebrew for Princess — Nobel one). Sarah shall be her name. [16] I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a child by her. I will bless Sarah, so that she shall become nations; rulers of peoples shall come from her.”

[17] And then *Avraham* fell face down again and laughed, and said, “I am a hundred years old. How can children be born to me? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”

[19] God said, “...your wife Sarah shall bear you a child, who, since you have laughed, shall be named *Yitzhak*, Isaac, Laughter. I will establish my covenant with *Yitzhak* as an everlasting covenant and for all the descendants who shall follow.”