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Genesis 12:1-9 and Romans 4:13-25
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Old Stories and New Beginnings

When I was in seminary, one of the projects that we had to do was to look at one of our ancestors, research their life, and write a paper about how they influenced our faith. I'm sure that many people chose grandparents or even great-grandparents, Instead, my grandpa Kenegy was very interested in genealogy, and so I got to look back to the 18th century to one of my Amish ancestors in Pennsylvania. The man was named Jacob Hochstetler, Jacob's family lived on the frontier, or in other words, they lived on stolen land and a warzone of the French and Indian War. Jacob is remembered because when the French commanded a group of Lenape and Shawnee warriors to attack their settlement, his boys got their hunting rifles and said let's shoot back, but Jacob said no, that's not the way. Even taking a life in self-defense goes against Jesus' way of non-resistance. This was a tragic story about the costliness of holding to one's convictions. The Native American war party burned the house and killed three of Jacob's family members, taking Jacob and two of his sons captive. Years later, when that tribe surrendered to the United States Army, one son, Joseph, my ancestor, chose to return to his father, while the other, Eli, chose his adoptive Native family.

As I attended our regional conference gathering. Some people there probably share this common ancestor, while others do not. We had immigrant congregations and converts, for whom this was their first experience with Mennonites beyond our local churches. So I ask you all, what parts of my story about Jacob do you find compelling? I mean, I was pretty excited to have such a complicated figure that I could claim as an ancestor, but blood ancestry alone has its... limitations. This is how I understand Paul's letter to the church in Rome. But let us take a step back to the Hebrew Bible.

The book of Genesis can be split into two parts. The first 11 chapters are the prehistory of creation, Adam, Eve, Cain, Abel, the tower of Babel, and The Flood. The rest is the stories of the Patriarchs, starting with Abram, who God will rename Abraham. God calls him from his father's homeland to a land he will show him, Canaan. Then God will make Abraham into a great nation, blessing those who bless him, cursing those who curse him, and through Abraham, all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. This is "the promise" referenced throughout the entire Bible.

Honestly, this fills me with the same kind of complex feelings as I have around Jacob. Here is Abraham. A man who chose to follow God into the unknown. But this promise is mired by Joshua's conquest... genocide of Canaan's native inhabitants. Jacob made an impossible choice of sticking to his beliefs in non-resistance, even to the death of his wife and some of his children. But Jacob also (wittingly or unwittingly) participated in settler colonialism, claiming private

ownership over land held in common by First Nations peoples. Not to mention the complexities of being a German-speaking peasant caught between the French and British Empires.

My family and faith are descended from this complex figure, as my ancestors slowly transitioned from Amish to Amish Mennonite to Mennonite. However, I'm not an ancestor of Abraham, I am a Gentile. So what gives me the right to follow Jesus, a Jewish Messiah?

Paul tries to answer this question in the part of Romans I usually skip over because I just cannot be bothered. Paul talks about how Abraham believed God that he could have kids at 100; therefore, God reckoned Abraham's faith as righteousness. Those are some fancy buzzwords. But I could translate "faith" to "trust." Abraham trusted God, and we trust God; therefore, we are the spiritual ancestors of Abraham. In the same way, if you would like to claim him, Jacob Hochstetler can be your spiritual ancestor too.

Abraham and Jacob are our old stories. I hope we can all learn each other's stories even if we do not want to follow in our ancestors' footsteps. We can, like Paul, focus on the parts we want to keep. Paul trusts God but has no desire for conquest. But most of all. An old story is an invitation, not a barrier. An inspiration, not destiny. Amen.