

## **From exceptionalism to radical inclusion:**

Psalm 24 & Ephesians 2:14-22

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Lent is a season that invites us to give up on things that we consider important to us so that we can focus on what is important to God. It is the time to de-centre “me” “us” and re-centre to God. That’s why, as you all know, Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and on that day, we hear “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

When we de-centre ourselves and re-centre to God, we are reminded that nothing belongs to us and that everything belongs to God: our money, possessions, bodies, families, relatives, friends, this earth, and the universe. They all belong to God. So, like the author of Psalm 24, the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it!” When we genuinely believe and confess this, we get to see that everything that we have, own, and relate are gifts, gifts from God. The water, air, sunlight, mountains, our cars, houses, and buildings are gifts, and they belong to God and not to us. We see God as the Host and we are the guests. This is precisely what our Indigenous siblings have been telling us, that the land where we are is a gift from the Creator. No one can own it and have it. We simply need to learn how to live together respectfully on this land given to us, and this starts by respecting our Indigenous siblings who were here first.

So, what does it mean to believe that God is the Host and that we are merely guests?

Allow me to tell a few stories first and afterward share my thoughts.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Radical Reformation movement just began, an Anabaptist called Elsy Bourmgartner was arrested. Zurich authorities told her that they would release her if she promised to leave the city and never return. While they were expecting her to accept this offer, Bourmgartner quoted Psalm 24:1 “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it” and refused to leave by asserting, “God created

the earth for her as much as for milords.”<sup>1</sup> Hans Feusi was also held captive and was offered the same option. Like Bourmgartner, he also quoted the bible verse and decided to remain. As a consequence, he was drowned in 1529.<sup>2</sup> Another Anabaptist, Hans Landis and who is assumed to be the last martyr, was an influential leader among the Anabaptists. He was executed in 1624, at the age of 70. Several times, the rulers in Zurich banished him from the land but he persistently refused to leave by citing Psalm 24. He outspokenly stated that the authorities do not have the power to ban or expel someone out of territory since the earth was the Lord’s.<sup>3</sup>

These witnesses illustrate that early Anabaptists strongly believed that God is the ultimate host. As God makes the sunrise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous, they believed that God welcomes anyone to be Her guests. God is the host who decides if someone should stay or leave, and He has decided to welcome everyone. As a result, it is not up to the kings, princes, lords, and political leaders who judge to expel or welcome. Although these three people were ordered to leave, they rejected it and stayed. While it is not written in their writings, they likely thought that to leave would mean to accept that the territory belongs to the princes and the rulers and not to God. This would also mean that by leaving, they would no longer confess that the earth is the Lord’s. As a result, they were resolute to remain.

As it is seen in the history of migrations of Anabaptists and Mennonites, confessing that the earth is the Lord’s does not only mean that one should remain in one’s place. It can also be interpreted as an affirming passage to leave one’s location. Experiencing severe persecutions, numerous Mennonites migrated to different parts of the world, without knowing where they would end up. Migrating to different locations did not mean that they were safer to travel than to remain. They did not know what they would encounter

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold SNYDER and Linda HUEBERT HECHT (eds.), *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers*, Waterloo ON, Wilfrid Laurier University, 1996, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> David J. REMPEL SMUCKER and John L. RUTH (eds.), *Hans Landis: Swiss Anabaptist Martyr in Seventeenth Century Documents*, trans. James W. LOWRY, Millersburg OH, Ohio Amish Library, 2003, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> David J. REMPEL SMUCKER and John L. RUTH (eds.), *Hans Landis*, pp. 105-109.

on the road, how to settle in the new place, and whom to trust and relate. However, they found consolation in Psalms 24, for this passage spoke to them that wherever they end up going, the place also belongs to God and that God welcomes anyone. The forced migrants found this passage so comforting that many had this bible verse written on the walls of their houses and worship spaces.<sup>4</sup>

To believe that God is the Host also invites us who live in a relevantly safe and rich country that whoever arrive at our places, they are God's people. A Mennonite biblical scholar, Waldemar Janzen writes that God is the divine host to all human beings and all the people are guests to the Host's house. Consequently, all guests are expected to follow "God's example and share their livelihood, their life, with their fellow guests on God's earth."<sup>5</sup> Following God's example, the hosts are called to welcome their guests and view them as God's people, as their siblings in Christ, especially those who are forced migrants.

To recap, to view that God is the host and we are all guests means to believe that we will stay where we are called to stay, even if the people in power and authority force us to leave. It is an act of resistance. We see this act of resistance by some of our Indigenous siblings when certain companies try to extract natural resources from their sacred land and territory. We see this act of resistance by the Palestinian people who are being dispossessed by Jewish authority from their land. And we also see this in Ukraine where the citizens are fighting against the Russian military invasion.

To believe that God is the host also means that this land belongs to God and so wherever we go, God will take care of and welcome us. It also means that we, people who have more than enough materials are called to welcome and serve those who are in need,

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<sup>4</sup> John ROTH, "'Blest be the ties that Bind': In Search of the Global Anabaptist Church Lecture Two: What Hath Zurich to do with Addis Ababa? Ecclesial Identity in the Global Anabaptist Church," *Conrad Grebel Review*, 31 (2013), p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Waldemar JANZEN, "Biblical Theology of Hospitality," in *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology*, 3-1 (Spring 2002), p. 10.

seeing them as our fellow guests and as people sent by God. We welcome anyone who comes to us, whether they are strangers, aliens, or people from different ethnocultural and racial backgrounds.

Yet, let's remember that when God invites us to welcome people, it is different from a typical practice of hospitality that we are accustomed to in this society, where the role of the host and guest are well divided. While some relationships begin as a host-and-guest relational dynamic, in the end, as it is stated in Ephesians 2:14-22, God is inviting everyone to be part of God's household, that all of us are one big family. And in this family of God, no one is a stranger, alien, or guest but rather, everyone is a family member.

Living in Canada as a Korean, I often hear the micro-aggression that many Asian Canadians are experiencing daily, especially when they are treated as perpetual guests. They often hear comments like, "Where are you from." If an Asian respond by saying Edmonton, they are asked, "No, but where are you really from" as if you do not look Canadian. Of course, since I'm a new immigrant, there is no issue with people asking me and my wife where we are from. We welcome you to ask us! However, there are Asian families who have been living in Canada for 3 or even 4 generations but they are still considered perpetual guests.

Being treated as perpetual guests can also occur in churches. For example, I know a Korean-Canadian pastor's kid who went to a pre-dominant white church in Vancouver. There, one of the church members told her, even knowing that she is a pastor's kid, that God's tent is so wide that God can even include people like you. People like you... hmmm... Fortunately, this was not a Mennonite church. Yet, treating the non-dominant group as perpetual guests can happen in Mennonite churches. When church planning, structure, policies, calendar, worship styles, and events are centred around so-called ethnic Mennonites, meaning people with Dutch, Swiss, Russian, and German

backgrounds, it explicitly and implicitly treats non-ethnic Mennonites as perpetual guests, as secondary church members. To stop regarding non-ethnic Mennonites as perpetual guests and treating them as full members requires the church to de-centre the dominant way of being and doing church and together with the minority group, co-construct what it means to be a church. How does this look like specifically? Well, to offer a few examples, start recognizing Kim, Hernandez, Gonzales, Park as Mennonite names, have kimchi, taco, and pupusa among the Mennonite food, and tell the history of faith and migration of Latino, Asian, and African Mennonites alongside with the European Mennonites.

As I've said earlier, Lent is a season that invites us to give up on things that we consider important to us so that we can focus on what is important to God. It is the time to de-centre me and re-centre to God. In the parable of the prodigal son, we see the younger son living his selfish way. But, when he is faced with hardship, he repents and returns to his father. He de-centred from himself and re-centred to his father.

What about the older son? From our point of view, he seems to be a diligent and hardworking son, a person with a strong work ethic. Yet, his moral standard, his worldview, and his belief could not accept and fully welcome his brother. That's why he said to his father "this son of yours" instead of saying "my brother". The father then invites the older son to focus on what is more important, that your brother who was dead has come to life, he was lost and now has been found. He is inviting his son to de-centre from himself and re-centre to what is important from the father's perspective. Without this de-centring and re-centring, there can't be any kind of reconciliation or inclusion.

As long as we live our lives centring ourselves and people who are like us, hospitality will merely be a practice that provide a minimum amount of space and time for people who are different from us. It is only when we de-centre ourselves and re-centre in God, we get to see that we are all guests on the Creator's land and all that we have are gifts

from God. It is this belief and attitude that can lead and empower us to practice the radical inclusion that God is inviting us, to create a community where no one is a stranger, alien, and perpetual guest but rather, beloved members of God's family.