

JOURNEY THROUGH GENESIS



50 DAYS OF

Eastertide

A DAILY DEVOTIONAL

by the pastors of First Presbyterian Church of Nashville

WEEK 4

SUNDAY, MAY 3

READ

Genesis 22

REFLECT

It was in seminary that I first heard the theory that Isaac was not a young boy at the time of Abraham's test. Some scholars believe he was nearly 16 years old (others say he could have been as old as 37!) – much younger and stronger than his elderly father. If this is true, then Isaac would have had to be willing to be bound up and placed on the altar atop Mount Moriah. It would have been nearly impossible for the aged Abraham to overtake him against his will, and no struggle is mentioned in the narrative. So what is often attributed to Abraham as a great act of faith must also be shared with Isaac as he trusted his father, and his father's God, and climbed up on that altar not knowing that the knife in his father's hand would at the last minute be restrained by an angel of the Lord. A father sacrificing his only, beloved son; a son obediently giving up his life as an offering -- sound familiar? In some ways, Isaac is a forerunner to Jesus. However, the key difference of course is that Abraham does not go through with the sacrifice. He is stopped. God, on the other hand, follows through. Jesus is crucified, dead, and buried. God's only Son murdered on another mountain – Golgotha. This time there was no ram in the thicket to substitute. No, Jesus was the Lamb of God sent to take away the sins of the world. And that is what he did through his death and resurrection.

RESPOND

Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your imagination as you read this chapter again picturing an older Isaac figure. How does this change the story for you? What faithfulness do you see reflected in both the father and the son? How does this story prepare us to hear the Good News of Jesus?

PRAY

Father, we praise You for Your unwavering faithfulness to us. Even when we stray from You, You continue to pursue us. You stop at nothing to demonstrate your love – not even giving up Your only, beloved son. As we reflect anew on this familiar but difficult story, help us to see your Son's reflection and receive anew the amazing grace we are offered in him. Amen.

MONDAY, MAY 4

READ

Genesis 23

REFLECT

Sometimes in the South we don't say what we mean or mean what we say. It's nice to know that humans have been doing that since Genesis 23. The writer of Genesis zooms in on a bartering conversation between Abraham and the Hittites at the city gates. Abraham is grieving the death of his wife of over 100 years and needs a place to bury her. Although it takes several exchanges and assurances that Abraham can have a burial plot for free, we finally have a price named and a purchase made. Abraham can finally bury his bride. For those of us who have lost loved ones, the literal business of grief is a complicated reality. On the one hand, having something to do, where we feel like we're honoring the dead, gently handling their final wishes and personal effects can be incredibly therapeutic. On the other hand, the to do list of death can be overwhelming. At times it can be more of hindrance to grief than a helpful aid to it. In the midst of this pandemic we are grieving. We are grieving the death of weddings, birthdays, graduations, jobs, handshakes, date nights, hugs and on top of that we're grieving the actual loss of more than 225,000 human lives worldwide. We know those numbers have names, families, and communities that go with them. Like Abraham, it's hard to know where to lay our dead (literally and figuratively). We don't have burial grounds for handshakes. Where do we put the death of seeing smiles now covered by masks? This pandemic is a strange land. Like Abraham, we are aliens here. This is uncharted territory for us. While we may be separated the Holy Spirit draws us together. We are held together by Christ, and God does not call us to go through this alone. Perhaps now more than ever, it's important for us southerners to actually say what we mean and mean what we say. Share your grief with one another. Name it. We may not be in the pew together but we can still mourn together, naming the death we're carrying and burying it in the arms of one another.

RESPOND

What have you lost during this pandemic? What are you grieving? Who can you share your grief with? Who else is grieving the same thing? Who is the Holy Spirit bringing to mind right now that you could call, write, facetime, or even zoom to mourn together?

PRAY

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow all day long? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death. But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me.

TUESDAY, MAY 5

READ

Genesis 24

REFLECT

How many parents pray that their child find a suitable mate? How many pray that the future spouses of their children will be young people of faith and commitment to a life pleasing to God? Apparently, it's a very old practice.

Genesis 24, though born of an ancient practice of arranged marriage, isn't all that different from our day. Abraham and his faithful servant believe that the providential God is at work in an ordinary reality like marriage. "The LORD . . . will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there." The servant prays, "O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham."

It seems common today for Christians to hedge their bets when it comes to providence. To ascribe to the sovereign God an interest in our marriage partners seems to them quaint. (I will confess that I'm not a fan of the "soul mate" theory of marriage – that each of us has only one true soul mate. I figure that we can be faithfully married to any number of people.) As the author of Genesis tells it, the providential God is not too busy to pay attention to husbands and wives and their children. In fact, marriage and children are one very important sphere of God's kingdom of blessedness. So, the faithful servant "just happens" to encounter Rebekah, none other than Abraham's great-niece! And she is perfect for Isaac!

Note one more thing: Rebekah proves faithful to the calling. Yes, the angel goes before the servant. Yes, he prays to the LORD and the LORD answers. And yes, Rebekah concurs in this divine providence. Her parents say, "We will call the girl and ask her." Rebekah says, "I will." I hear echoes of Joseph's betrothed Mary saying, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord."

In the mystery of covenant life, it is impossible to say where God's initiative meets human response. Such, also, is the way of marriage, in which two become one flesh. It is impossible to say where one ends and the other begins. Rather than explaining, the believer prays. The believer asks for help; the believer gives thanks and rejoices in God's provision.

RESPOND

In what ways has God answered your requests for help in ordinary life? In what ways have you hesitated to ask for such help? In what ways might you recommit to trusting the providence of God?

PRAY

Thank you, faithful God, for bending down to hear the everyday prayers of your people. Thank you for blessing the earth in ordinary ways. When our doubts flow, and when we question whether you are really at work in our families, remind us of moments such as these. Empower us to say anew, "I will."

WEDNESDAY, MAY 6

READ

Genesis 25

REFLECT

Esau sells his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup! He gives up his very valuable rights as the firstborn son of Isaac to his younger brother, Jacob. What was Esau thinking? He was thinking only of his hunger and his desire for the immediate pleasure of eating a warm bowl of soup.

How often do we fail to recognize the abundant blessings that are ours until they are gone? Relationships and time with family and friends, good health, a job or business, opportunities for study and learning, life itself, all these things can slip from our fingers and vanish. We never even thought to embrace each and every blessing of an ordinary day with joy and gratitude.

There are many blessings we once enjoyed that are no longer available to us during this time of social distancing. We miss so much of our once "normal" lives and yet so many blessings are ours each day. We may be separated by safety concerns, but we are united by the Holy Spirit and we are united with God through Jesus Christ. We can also be united by our spirit of growing gratitude and trust in God.

RESPOND

How can you embrace the goodness of the day? What are you grateful for today? Can you think of at least 5 things for which you are grateful? Give thanks to God for your blessings. Consider keeping a gratitude journal listing each day those things for which you are grateful.

PRAY

Gracious God, Forgive me for my blindness to the gifts that are mine today. Help me to see and embrace these gifts with gratitude and joy and with open hands, knowing they are given to me by You. Help me to offer back these gifts to You, seeking your guidance in using these gifts to Your glory. We pray with grateful hearts, in Jesus' name, Amen.

THURSDAY, MAY 7

READ

Genesis 26

REFLECT

Since his father's death, life for Isaac has not been easy. He's had all kinds of family problems. And then a famine hits the land. The family business, people's livelihoods, come screeching to a painful stop.

Isaac has no choice but to head out in search of greener pastures. He moves his family to Gerar, where hostile Philistines were sabotaging the wells his father Abraham had dug. Life was far from easy. Every time Isaac would dig a new well, the Philistines would claim it as their own.

Isaac's first well he called Esek, which means "contention". He dug a second well and called it Sitnah, which means "enmity." This is no easy going. Finally in Genesis 26:22, "And Isaac moved away from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so they named it Rehoboth, for he said, 'At last the Lord has made room for us, and we will be fruitful in the land.'" And two verses later, God appears to Isaac and reconfirmed the promise given to his father Abraham, "I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham's sake."

Rehoboth means "broad place." Right there in a foreign land, in time of famine, surrounded by hostile powers the Lord makes a way. Like Isaac, we must keep walking by faith. Yes, there are difficulties we will and are facing. Yes, we can feel trapped and surrounded by Philistines. But with God there is a Rehoboth nearby.

RESPOND

Are you in need of a Rehoboth? Are you taking time to let go of the "old" wells that have been stuffed with garbage, no longer springing water?

PRAY

Lord, you keep your promises. And I don't. This is amazing grace. Thanks are not enough for the giving of your Son. He is the spring of living water that can't be stopped up by any seen or unseen power. Let me drink deeply from the spring. Let me know you Jesus more and more. Amen.

FRIDAY, MAY 8

READ

Genesis 27:1-45

REFLECT

Genesis 27 could be a case study for what is meant when one uses the phrase, "dysfunctional family." Rev. Moore reminded us last week in his sermon that, "every family is dysfunctional, even church families." Still, these verses shine light on the favoritism of a father, the betrayal of a wife, and the deceit of a son. And for what? A blessing. Walter Brueggemann says of this family, "the family in Genesis is preoccupied with blessing, as though it matters more than things visible." (Brueggemann isn't suggesting the blessing is less significant than visible things, he is simply pointing out that the family in Genesis is utterly captivated by the blessing) This family knows that these words spoken by this father over his son will pass the good will of the heavens and the fortunes of this world from one generation to the next. This sort of thing is nearly impossible for a modern day American to understand. Built into the fabric of our understanding of the world is an individualism that assumes we are able to craft whichever future we so desire. That can make the good news of Jesus so hard to understand on a level that evokes true gratitude. When we know that we can create a rather fine life for ourselves, it is quite difficult to make sense of a promise that Jesus, and not our own ability, offers life to the full.

RESPOND

How is Jesus' proclamation from John 10:10 true in your life? How do you express gratitude with your life? Is it hard for you to accept the good news of Jesus, because of a modern day mentality of individualism?

PRAY

God of life, you have given everything, that we may be redeemed. Lord, may we not believe the lie that we are left to ourselves to make something of our lives. May we trust in the good news that in Jesus, our lives are made full. Give us the courage and creativity to live faithful lives of gratitude at every turn. Amen.

SATURDAY, MAY 9

READ

Genesis 28

REFLECT

Jacob is on the run for his life. He has cheated his brother Esau out of his birth-right and Isaac's blessing. Jacob is a fugitive having been banished from his home and all that he knows. Jacob is in the middle of nowhere, an unnamed place between home and an unknown future. In the midst of this self-created wilderness God comes to Jacob in a visual and auditory dream. The vision connects heaven and earth. Jacob's world of fear, terror, loneliness and guilt is interrupted with an alternative. Heaven is connected with earth. Earth is not left to its own resources, and heaven is not a remote self-contained realm for God. Jacob had assumed he traveled alone with his only purpose being survival. God shatters Jacob's limited outlook with words of promise. Earth is a place of possibility because it has not been and will not be cut off from the sustaining role of God. God promises accompaniment, protection, and a future homecoming. Jacob responds in awe. He names this no-name-place Bethel, God's house, and promises to commit himself to the Lord.

RESPOND

In this wilderness of Coronavirus isolation, we have been banished from the familiar and do not know what the future holds. We can live in fear or hear the words of promise. Jesus said, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Heaven is connected to earth. The providence of God will lead us into God's kingdom of love.

PRAY

Gracious Lord, remind us that you are with us, we are in your hands, and that the future is yours through Jesus Christ your Son, our Lord. Amen.