

Lessons from the Patriarchs sermon series

“Isaac”

[Genesis 26:17-25](#)

This is the second Sunday of the sermon series, Lessons from the Patriarchs. Today, we turn to Isaac, the son of Abraham. Of the 4 patriarchs whose lives we are examining in this sermon series, Isaac seems to be the least significant person. The book of Genesis does not give him much attention. Out of 39 chapters that are devoted to the patriarchs, the 26th chapter is the only place where Isaac appears as the main figure. He has a role in other chapters as well, but only as a supporting actor, part of someone else's main story. One of those stories is the famous incident of Abraham almost offering Isaac as a sacrifice to God. I'm sure this is the story that comes to mind for most of us when we think about Isaac.

When you read the stories of Abraham and Isaac in the book of Genesis, you will notice something quite interesting. The major storylines in Isaac's life are quite similar to those of his father, Abraham:

- 1) As his parents did, he and his wife struggle to have their children;
- 2) As he and his brother, Ishmael were at odds with each other, so too are his two children, Jacob and Esau, even from the time when they were still in their mother's womb;
- 3) There was a famine that forced Abraham and Sarah to go to Egypt. Isaac also faces a famine, and has to move to Gerar;
- 4) To survive in the foreign land, Abraham lied to Pharaoh, the ruler of the country. He pretended that his wife was his sister. And, Isaac does the same thing in Gerar, fearing his own life.

And, today's scripture gives us another example of how the events in Isaac's life mirror that of his father, how there is continuity and repetition from generation to generation. As was the case for Abraham, God blesses Isaac in every way despite some shortcomings in his life. Earlier in the chapter that we have read from, we hear how Isaac planted crops in the land of Gerar and harvested a hundredfold even during famine. As a result, he became quite rich. Before long, Isaac was a regional power with many flocks and herds and servants. But, as his wealth continued to grow, the Philistines, the residents of Gerar became jealous of his success. They must have resented his wealth and felt uneasy about his growing power in their land. So, they plugged up all his wells, the wells that his father Abraham had dug, filling them with dirt, and asked him to leave their town.

In the ancient world, digging a well was a symbolic act of claiming ownership of the land on which it was located. So, we can assume that Isaac was living in the land that belonged to his father. But, by filling up the wells, the Philistines sought to wipe out Isaac's ownership of the land and his rights as a resident alien. Their jealousy and fear was so great that they destroyed wells that were of great value.

Because the residents could have drawn water from Isaac's wells, they could have used that valuable resource, but they stopped them instead. Filled with jealousy and fear, out of a mindset of scarcity in the

time of famine, the Philistines saw the foreigners who were living in their land as threats instead of assets and blessings. It was better for them to try and cut Isaac's tie to the land than try to live together with him and strike up a partnership.

I see what happened to Isaac and his family back then is still happening in the world today, unfortunately. There are many difficulties new refugees and immigrants across the globe face as they try to establish their lives in their new homes. They struggle with language barriers and cultural differences. Because of such struggle, many parents find it difficult to raise their children and to help them succeed in school. They struggle to find suitable employment as their credentials are not recognized and they do not have relevant local work experience. And, they are often looked at with suspicion, as if they are taking away the jobs of the local people. They are subjected to prejudice and racism. They become victims of jealousy and fear. In the midst of these struggles, those who do not have the support of family, friends, and social networks feel alienated and lost while adjusting to life in a different kind of society.

So, what a blessing that our church offers a community of support for immigrants, especially for the migrants from West Africa! The African Fellowship that started with just a few members is now the biggest small group of our church. Antwanette who joined the church last year said that while she grew up Catholic, she decided to become a Methodist when she came to worship with us one Sunday and realized that many of her friends from Sierra Leone were already here! So, when she found out there would be a new member class on the following Saturday, she said, "I am coming" and indeed she showed up for the class!

Friends, our church is a place of welcome for all of God's children. Whether you were born and raised in California or immigrated here from other states or other countries, whether you are a long-time church member or a newcomer, as the welcome statement of our church included in our Sunday worship bulletin says, "regardless of your age, race, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, cultural background, physical or mental health and ability, family status or financial circumstances," you are welcome here!

This is your church home. This is your church family. God has brought each one of us to this place of worship to bless us all. With who we are and with all we bring with us, through our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness, we make this community of faith unique and special. And, we extend our welcome to all who are hungry and thirsty for a community of Christian believers of mutual love and respect.

Let's get back to the story of Isaac. What did he do when the Philistines came and denied his legal rights, his ownership of his father's wells and asked him to leave? That's all recorded in today's scripture Kallie read for us in Genesis 26:17-25.

Apparently, Isaac's personally was meek and mild. Highly likely, he did not like confrontation. So, instead of fighting back, he retreated. Instead of staying in the place of hostility and conflict, he moved his family to the place called the Valley of Gerar and settled there. There, he re-dug old wells. Like the ones he left behind in Gerar, these wells had been dug by his father Abraham, too. But, the Philistines had stopped them after he died. Isaac re-dug them and gave them the same names his father had given them.

Isaac probably decided to re-dig the wells his father had dug because he needed to secure water for his family and re-digging old wells was easier than digging new ones. But, beyond just convenience, by re-digging his father's wells and restoring their original names, Isaac was honoring his father's legacy and rediscovering the heritage of his faith.

Re-digging the well means for us that we reopen the spiritual wells of our forefathers and mothers. By acknowledging and honoring what God has done in the generations of the past and giving thanks to God for the legacy of our ancestors of faith, we can tap into the depth of their knowledge and wisdom, their trust and faith in God. And we must tap into this vital life source in this time of spiritual famine, spiritual dryness. Because the current struggles that we face are not just our own. As the writer of Ecclesiastes says, "What has been will be again and what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

God has given to us our ancestors of faith for a purpose. The saints in heaven leave us a legacy to follow. We can examine how they lived their lives on earth, and how God guided and led them on their journeys of faith. In the stories of their faith and action, of their triumphs and failures, we discover who we are, what we are to believe, and how we are to live today. That's why we did our sermon series on John Wesley last fall and why we are doing this one now on the patriarchs. It is our way of re-digging plugged up wells.

However, Isaac did not stop at re-digging his father's wells. He not only re-dug his father's old wells but also dug new wells. Verse 19 says, Isaac's servants dug in the valley and discovered a well of fresh water there. Unfortunately, the new well caused a problem to Isaac. The Philistines came and claimed it as theirs. Again, being a man of peace, Isaac did not fight with them, but instead moved on. He just kept going. He dug up another well, and the Philistines quarreled over that one also. Once again, Isaac did not fight with them but moved on to digging a third well. Finally, the Philistines stopped their dispute, and left Isaac and his family alone to live peacefully in their land.

The name Isaac means laughter, but his life was hardly a life of joy. He lost his half brother through a family conflict. He was almost killed by the hands of his father. He became successful in the land of Philistines but constantly had to battle his neighbors' jealousy. Perhaps this is not far from our own lives. While we laugh, our lives are colored with sorrow. We too must carry on through traumatic events in our lives, through the broken relationships with our family, friends and neighbors. Like Isaac, we too must persevere and learn to keep digging. It is in the process of digging that we can laugh in the face of what the ancient Greeks described as the tragi-comedy of our lives.

Through digging and perseverance, Isaac found peace in his life. But, he had one more thing to do: He had to go to Beersheba. It was an important place for his family. His father Abraham had dug a well there, but the servants of Abimelech, the ruler of the region, had stolen it from him. Abraham took it back from them by bringing sheep and cattle to the ruler and making a covenant with him. And he and his family lived there for many years.

So, Isaac went back to Beersheba. Back to his roots. That night, God appeared and said to him the same blessing that was given to his father, "I am the God of your father Abraham; do not be afraid, for I am

with you and will bless you and make your offspring numerous for my servant Abraham's sake." Then, Isaac built an altar there and worshipped God. He pitched his tent there and dug a well. In other words, he settled down there. He made his home there.

You may recall another famous story of a well found in the New Testament. The well is the meeting place of Jesus and the Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John. The place of encounter with God in the past is also a place of fresh encounter. And there in the encounter with the Samaritan woman, Jesus presents himself as the well from which she can draw living water. He promises that he will be for her and all others who come to him the source of living water, from which we will never be thirsty.

Brothers and sisters, all my siblings in Christ, may we hear Jesus' invitation to come to him. Just as he was the source of living water for our spiritual ancestors, he offers himself to us as our home, a place of satisfaction and rest for our weary and thirsty souls. By the grace of God, may we persevere and re-dig the wells of our faith. May we receive the promised blessing of eternal life in Jesus Christ, who is, was and always will be our source of living water.

Amen.