

Week 7, Sunday: The Call to Sacrifice Isaac and the Death of Sarah
Genesis 22:1-19; 23:1-20

For Journaling or Discussing with Another:

Read Genesis 22:1-19

- What are your initial reactions to reading this? Are they more positive or negative?
- How would you describe your thinking and/or feeling about God? About Abraham?
- Recall a time when you sensed that God was testing your faith. How did you respond?

Considering Abraham's Response in a Positive Light

- Abraham has wavered in faith before, why not here? What might have changed him?
- What does this story reveal to us about God?
- How does this story call upon us to deepen our faith and our hope?

Considering Abraham's Response in a Negative Light

- In an earlier story (Genesis 18:22-33), Abraham had boldly pleaded with God for the lives of others, "Suppose there are 50 righteous? What about 45? What if 40? How about 30? Suppose 20? or if only 10?" Why do you think Abraham is so passive in this story?
- In verse 1 we read that God is testing Abraham. Is it possible that God was disappointed that Abraham would not argue for his son's life, or offer his own instead?
- What might have happened if Sarah had been consulted?

Pondering child sacrifice:

- Everywhere else in scripture where child sacrifice is mentioned, it is described as something God opposes or hates. For example in Jeremiah 7:30-31 the prophet writes, "*For the people of Judah have done evil in my sight, says the Lord; ... they go on building the high place of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire—which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind.*" For other examples see Leviticus 18:21, 20:1-5; Deuteronomy 12:31, 2 Kings 17:17-18, 21:2-6; and Ezekiel 16:20-21. Why might it be important to handle this story with care?
- We do not practice old fashioned child sacrifice. However, in our modern society (marked by consumption, militarism, racism, and climate change), anxious over the economy and security, how might we be participating in less obvious forms of child sacrifice?

Week 7, Monday: Sarah's Death

Scripture: Genesis 23

Sarah lived for one hundred and twenty-seven years; this was the length of Sarah's life. And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. Abraham rose up from beside his dead, and said to the Hittites, 'I am a stranger and an alien residing among you; give me property among you for a burying-place, so that I may bury my dead out of my sight.' The Hittites answered Abraham, 'Hear us, my lord; you are a mighty prince among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places; none of us will withhold from you any burial ground for burying your dead.' Abraham rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land. He said to them, 'If you are willing that I should bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and entreat for me Ephron son of Zohar, so that he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he owns; it is at the end of his field. For the full price let him give it to me in your presence as a possession for a burying-place.' Now Ephron was sitting among the Hittites; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, of all who went in at the gate of his city, 'No, my lord, hear me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it; in the presence of my people I give it to you; bury your dead.' Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land. He said to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, 'If you only will listen to me! I will give the price of the field; accept it from me, so that I may bury my dead there.' Ephron answered Abraham, 'My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver—what is that between you and me? Bury your dead.' Abraham agreed with Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants.

So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area, passed to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, in the presence of all who went in at the gate of his city. After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. The field and the cave that is in it passed from the Hittites into Abraham's possession as a burying-place.

Reflection: Sarah dies. Abraham mourns and purchases a field with a cave in order to bury Sarah with dignity. Notice that although Ephron seems to imply the price is modest, "*Four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between you and me?*" it's actually quite expensive. Perhaps Abraham's emotions are being exploited. However, notice that the purchased plot is in Canaan, the land God has promised! Even in death, Sarah plays an integral part in God's unfolding story of promise. Her burial gives her clan a foothold in the promised land.

Christ, crucified and resurrected from the dead, is lord of our promised land. Baptized into Christ, we too have a foothold in the land of promise. Christ has died, Christ has risen, and we shall rise too. Even in death, we too are part of God's story of promise.

To Ponder: Recall an experience of death and burial. Who or what helped you through?

Prayer: Thank you, O God, for Sarah, our ancestor in the faith. Thank you for her openness to your promise, her laughter, her hospitality, and her willingness to be surprised. Give me also a degree of openness, opportunities for laughter, and an ample measure of faith. Amen

Week 7, Tuesday: Bold Prayer and Consent

Scripture: Genesis 24

Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years; and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things. Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his house, who had charge of all that he had, 'Put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, but will go to my country and to my kindred and get a wife for my son Isaac.' The servant said to him, 'Perhaps the woman may not be willing to follow me to this land; must I then take your son back to the land from which you came?' Abraham said to him, 'See to it that you do not take my son back there. The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and swore to me, "To your offspring I will give this land", he will send his angel before you; you shall take a wife for my son from there. But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this oath of mine; only you must not take my son back there.' So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master and swore to him concerning this matter.

Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and departed, taking all kinds of choice gifts from his master; and he set out and went to Aram-naharaim, to the city of Nahor. He made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water; it was towards evening, the time when women go out to draw water. And he said, 'O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. I am standing here by the spring of water, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. Let the girl to whom I shall say, "Please offer your jar that I may drink", and who shall say, "Drink, and I will water your camels"—let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master.'

Before he had finished speaking, there was Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, coming out with her water-jar on her shoulder. The girl was very fair to look upon, a virgin whom no man had known. She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up. Then the servant ran to meet her and said, 'Please let me sip a little water from your jar.' 'Drink, my lord,' she said, and quickly lowered her jar upon her hand and gave him a drink. When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, 'I will draw for your camels also, until they have finished drinking.' So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough and ran again to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels. The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether or not the LORD had made his journey successful.

When the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold nose-ring weighing a half-shekel, and two bracelets for her arms weighing ten gold shekels, and said, 'Tell me whose daughter you are. Is there room in your father's house for us to spend the night?' She said to him, 'I am the daughter of Bethuel son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor.' She added, 'We have plenty of straw and fodder and a place to spend the night.' The man bowed his head and worshipped the LORD and said, 'Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness towards my master. As for me, the LORD has led me on the way to the house of my master's kin.'

Then the girl ran and told her mother's household about these things. Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban; and Laban ran out to the man, to the spring. As soon as he had seen the nose-ring, and the bracelets on his sister's arms, and when he heard the words of his sister Rebekah, 'Thus the man spoke to me', he went to the man; and there he was, standing by the camels at the spring. He said, 'Come in, O blessed of the LORD. Why do you stand outside when I have prepared the house and a place for the camels?' So the man came into the house; and Laban unloaded the camels, and gave him straw and fodder for the camels, and water to wash his feet and the feet of the men who were with him. Then food was set before him to eat; but he said, 'I will not eat until I have told my errand.' He said, 'Speak on.'

So he said, 'I am Abraham's servant. The LORD has greatly blessed my master, and he has become wealthy; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys. And Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master when she was old; and he has given him all that he has. My master made me swear, saying, "You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I live; but you shall go to my father's house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son." I said to my master, "Perhaps the woman will not follow me." But he said to me, "The LORD, before whom I walk, will send his angel with you and make your way successful. You shall get a wife for my son from my kindred, from my father's house. Then you will be free from my oath, when you come to my kindred; even if they will not give her to you, you will be free from my oath."

'I came today to the spring, and said, "O LORD, the God of my master Abraham, if now you will only make successful the way I am going! I am standing here by the spring of water; let the young woman who comes out to draw, to whom I shall say, 'Please give me a little water from your jar to drink,' and who will say to me, 'Drink, and I will draw for your camels also'—let her be the woman whom the LORD has appointed for my master's son.'

'Before I had finished speaking in my heart, there was Rebekah coming out with her water-jar on her shoulder; and she went down to the spring, and drew. I said to her, "Please let me drink." She quickly let down her jar from her shoulder, and said, "Drink, and I will also water your camels." So I drank, and she also watered the camels. Then I asked her, "Whose daughter are you?" She said, "The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor's son, whom Milcah bore to him." So I put the ring on her nose, and the bracelets on her arms. Then I bowed my head and worshipped the LORD, and blessed the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me by the right way to obtain the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son. Now then, if you will deal loyally and truly with my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so that I may turn either to the right hand or to the left.'

Then Laban and Bethuel answered, 'The thing comes from the LORD; we cannot speak to you anything bad or good. Look, Rebekah is before you; take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son, as the LORD has spoken.'

When Abraham's servant heard their words, he bowed himself to the ground before the LORD. And the servant brought out jewellery of silver and of gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekah; he also gave to her brother and to her mother costly ornaments. Then he and the men who were with him ate and drank, and they spent the night there. When they rose in the morning, he said, 'Send me back to my master.' Her brother and her mother said, 'Let the girl remain with us a while, at least ten days; after that she may go.' But he said to them, 'Do not delay me, since the LORD has made my journey successful; let me go, that I may go to my master.' They said, 'We will call the girl, and ask her.' And they called Rebekah, and said to her, 'Will you go with this man?' She said, 'I will.' So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his men. And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, 'May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes.' Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man; thus the servant took Rebekah, and went his way.

Now Isaac had come from Beer-lahai-roi, and was settled in the Negeb. Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field; and looking up, he saw camels coming. And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, and said to the servant, 'Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us?' The servant said, 'It is my master.' So she took her veil and covered herself. And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

Reflection: Some Biblical stories are best read in one sitting. Thus, we have a longer episode today, one that shifts the focus from Abraham and Sarah to the next generation. Notice that though the characters are changing, the central issues of land, descendants, and blessing are not. Isaac must have a wife for the promise of *descendants* to be fulfilled. Abraham and Isaac are now in the *land* that God has promised, Canaan. However, Isaac's wife must not come from Canaan or else Abraham and Sarah's tribe will begin to blend in and will lose their distinctiveness.

Thus, this lovely story unfolds. It begins with Abraham *seeking* a wife for Isaac and it ends with Isaac *finding* love and comfort; yet these two patriarchs are not the central characters, two others share that distinction. The servant and Rebekah may hold less power than Abraham and Isaac; however, both demonstrate the kind of bold faith that continues to fuel God's unfolding story.

Notice the boldness in the servant's request. Rather than asking for something general, "*Give me a sign, O Lord,*" his plea is boldly specific, "*Let the girl to whom I say 'x' and who answers back 'y' be the one!*" Also note that Rebekah is not simply a pawn being manipulated. Abraham and the servant understand that her consent is necessary, and so in the first paragraph they negotiate backup plans if she is unwilling to follow. Later, when her family members ask, "*Will you go with this man,*" Rebekah responds, "*I will,*" and in so doing she takes her place in the story.

It is not always the right time or circumstance for such a bold and specific request of God; recall that Jesus once said to Satan, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." (Matthew 4:7) So too, it is not always right to offer consent; but at times it is. The faith journey requires discernment.

To Ponder:

- Recall a time when you were led, or tempted, to pray for something specific. What was the result?
- Recall a time when you felt called to give or withhold your consent. What happened?

Prayer: Call to us, speak to us, lead us, O God. Then quiet our minds and give us the kind of wonder and hope that attunes our hearts to listen. And give us courage to follow. Amen.

Week 7, Wednesday: Moving On

Scripture: Genesis 25:1-18

Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. Jokshan was the father of Sheba and Dedan. The sons of Dedan were Asshurim, Letushim, and Leummim. The sons of Midian were Ephah, Epher, Hanoch, Abida, and Eldaah. All these were the children of Keturah. Abraham gave all he had to Isaac. But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastwards to the east country.

This is the length of Abraham's life, one hundred and seventy-five years. Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with his wife Sarah. After the death of Abraham God blessed his son Isaac. And Isaac settled at Beer-lahai-roi.

These are the descendants of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's slave-girl, bore to Abraham. These are the names of the sons of Ishmael, named in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael; and Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, Mishma, Dumah, Massa, Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah. These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages and by their encampments, twelve princes according to their tribes. (This is the length of the life of Ishmael, one hundred and thirty-seven years; he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people.) They settled from Havilah to Shur, which is opposite Egypt in the direction of Assyria; he settled down alongside all his people.

Reflection: Now the Abraham saga comes to a close. There is a brief description of another wife and more children, at least some of whom the Israelites will later look back upon as the ancestors of neighboring peoples, e.g. the Midianites. Although these neighboring people will be cousins, the narrator makes clear that God's promise of creating *a favored nation through whom all the world will be blessed* is being passed down through Isaac alone.

Then Abraham dies. Though brief, the narrative gives us a sense of peace. Abraham has lived to a ripe old age, he breathes his last and is gathered to his people, and his two rival sons Ishmael and Isaac cooperate in burying him with his beloved Sarah. Now the story moves on. It is, after all, not Abraham's story, it is God's. Abraham plays an important part, indeed; but now it is time for him to get out of the way, so that the story may play out in the next generation. Before stepping aside however, Abraham passes on his wealth in a way that takes seriously God's ongoing mission.

This is the way it works with us too. We too are called to risk-taking faith, called to follow the way of Jesus, called to engage! Then at some point in life, we are called to get out of the way so that the story can play out in and through the lives of others; and we too are called to pass on wealth in a way that takes seriously God's ongoing mission.

To Ponder: How are you working, voting, giving in a way that serves God's mission now; ... and also helps prepare for God's story to be played out in the next generation?

Prayer: We thank you O God for our ancestors in the faith, for those who nurtured us and revealed that we too have our part to play, for those who served with deep faith and integrity and then got out of the way, and for those who shared wealth. May we follow their example. Amen.

Week 7, Thursday: Preparing for Jacob

Scripture: Genesis 25:19-34

These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her; and she said, 'If it is to be this way, why do I live?' So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her,

'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.'

When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterwards his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, 'Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!' Therefore he was called Edom (meaning red). Jacob said, 'First sell me your birthright.' Esau said, 'I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?' Jacob said, 'Swear to me first.' So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Reflection: The story is preparing to shift its focus from Abraham to his grandson Jacob. Yes, there is still more of son Isaac's story in the next chapter, but now we are being prepared for Jacob. If you've never read the Genesis stories before, in this passage you can easily sense the forward-looking foreshadowing:

- Wee-infant Jacob demonstrates boldness and strength negotiating the birth canal while clamping down on this brother's heel
- Adult Esau trades his birthright for lentil stew showing himself to be a weak fool
- Even before the birth, God predicts the reversal of power between the two.

If we are familiar with the stories to come, however; instead of forward looking foreshadowing, we may suspect this is, instead, a bit of backward-looking justification. If someone were to ask, "How it is that God's promise will pass on through the second born son instead of the first?" or "Why is Jacob the chosen one when he later proves to be a conniving cheat?" Here in these brief verses is justification:

- Because we need boldness in our leaders and Jacob has demonstrated it since birth,
- Because the elder brother is foolish and dimwitted; we need more from our leaders,
- Because God is free to choose whomever God chooses.

To Ponder: When have you been surprised by effective leadership (a sound decision or creative response) from someone with obvious weaknesses, someone a bit suspect?

Prayer: Raise up bold and courage leaders, O God, who will act with justice and compassion, shrewdness and foresight, for the sake of this generation and the ones that will follow. Amen.

Week 7, Friday: Leadership

Scripture: Genesis 26:1-33

Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Gerar, to King Abimelech of the Philistines. The LORD appeared to Isaac and said, 'Do not go down to Egypt; settle in the land that I shall show you. Reside in this land as an alien, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfil the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will give to your offspring all these lands; and all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves through your offspring, because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.'

So Isaac settled in Gerar. When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, 'She is my sister'; for he was afraid to say, 'My wife,' thinking, 'or else the men of the place might kill me for the sake of Rebekah, because she is attractive in appearance.' When Isaac had been there a long time, King Abimelech of the Philistines looked out of a window and saw him fondling his wife Rebekah. So Abimelech called for Isaac, and said, 'So she is your wife! Why then did you say, "She is my sister"?' Isaac said to him, 'Because I thought I might die because of her.' Abimelech said, 'What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us.' So Abimelech warned all the people, saying, 'Whoever touches this man or his wife shall be put to death.'

Isaac sowed seed in that land, and in the same year reaped a hundredfold. The LORD blessed him, and the man became rich; he prospered more and more until he became very wealthy. He had possessions of flocks and herds, and a great household, so that the Philistines envied him. (Now the Philistines had stopped up and filled with earth all the wells that his father's servants had dug in the days of his father Abraham.) And Abimelech said to Isaac, 'Go away from us; you have become too powerful for us.'

So Isaac departed from there and camped in the valley of Gerar and settled there. Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of his father Abraham; for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham; and he gave them the names that his father had given them. But when Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found there a well of spring water, the herders of Gerar quarrelled with Isaac's herders, saying, 'The water is ours.' So he called the well Esek, because they contended with him. Then they dug another well, and they quarrelled over that one also; so he called it Sitnah. He moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he called it Rehoboth, saying, 'Now the LORD has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land.'

From there he went up to Beer-sheba. And that very night the LORD appeared to him and said, '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.' So he built an altar there, called on the name of the LORD, and pitched his tent there. And there Isaac's servants dug a well.

Then Abimelech went to him from Gerar, with Ahuzzath his adviser and Phicol the commander of his army. Isaac said to them, 'Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?' They said, 'We see plainly that the LORD has been with you; so we say, let there be an oath between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you so that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the LORD.' So he made them a feast, and they ate and drank. In the morning they rose early and exchanged oaths; and Isaac set them on their way, and they departed from him in peace. That same day Isaac's servants came and told him about the well that they had dug, and said to him, 'We have found water!' He called it Shibah; therefore the name of the city is Beer-sheba to this day.

Reflection: Today's series of stories may sound oddly familiar, as they closely parallel stories from the life of Abraham. God appears to Isaac and speaks words of promise, God had done so with Abraham too. Isaac then travels to the land of Gerar where he passes off his wife as his sister, Abraham did that also. Isaac gains wealth, then carefully contends with Abimelech over wells and water, same as with Abraham. All this has happened before with Abraham. Really there is little original material in the Isaac narrative. Note also, in the stories of Rebekah becoming his wife and the birth of his children, Isaac has been a silent character.

What might the narrative be communicating by Isaac's quiet role? Perhaps simply that, whereas some leaders are more charismatic and/or complicated, ending up with more glamorous stories, still the coming to fruition of God's promises continues even with less dramatic characters. Though there is little novel material with Isaac, nevertheless we learn:

- Like his father, he is in right relationship with God and converses with God,
- Like his father, he makes mistakes and learns from them and keeps moving forward,
- Like his father, he plants seeds, makes business deals, and contends with others over issues of justice and the distribution of resources,
- Like his father he is a solid leader.

To Ponder: What stories do you hope will be told about you after you die? Any you might write down?

Prayer: Equip me to fulfill the responsibilities you have entrusted to me; and entrust to me new ones as you see fit. Keep giving me a measure of affirmation; but save me from the need to make a name for myself. Amen.