

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
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Epiphany Seattle – Todd Foster

A Tale of Two Men

In nomine...

Last week Doyt talked about Abraham and Isaac, about human sacrifice as an accepted practice in the water in which they swam, and about Abraham's connection to a deeper truth underneath. Abraham and Isaac lived in a world ruled, according to the popular telling, by a panoply of fickle and capricious little gods that demanded sacrifice. According to the story of the day, the one everyone knew, there was no better, no more efficacious sacrifice than the child whom you loved.

But what Abraham knew, and what Isaac learned, was that the God Abraham served was different. The God of Abraham was a God of covenant, a God of promise, one who would safeguard and bring about God's promises not because of the worthiness of the recipient, but because of the trustworthiness of the giver. Abraham knew that Isaac would be given back to him: God had made a promise. Sure enough, God provided an alternative sacrifice, a ram caught in the blackberries. (You thought they were bad in *your* garden!)

The question that remained with me after last week's sermon was, How do I cultivate in myself a connection to that deeper reality that Abraham knew? How do I ensure that when these two views of reality rub up against one another, when I have to make a choice between a cultural norm and the invitation of God, how can I be relied upon to follow Abraham's example, trusting to the God of promise?

Today's first reading consists of selections from Genesis 24. In this chapter, we find the story of two men who saw reality from two very different perspectives. One was utterly at the mercy of the cultural waters in which he swam. The other one knew the God of promise. The ways these two men interpreted reality, the stories they told about what was going on, corresponded to the reality each one could see.

The first man I want to talk about is Laban. Laban was a trickster without a conscience. The stories he told himself hovered around the ideas of every man for himself, looking out for number one, and getting while the getting was good. When Rebekah came home wearing jewelry that Abraham's servant had given her, Laban saw that jewelry and he hurried out to greet the giver of such gifts. Laban brought that servant into his home and, we are told, unloaded the servant's camels (and all the gifts they carried!) himself. Laban promised his sister in marriage in return for the customary wedding gifts, and only when the servant prepared to leave the next morning did Laban decide Rebekah should be consulted. Laban was stalling for time! If only he could keep the servant there longer, there would surely be more gifts! Unhappily for Laban, Rebekah consented immediately to the marriage, and the caravan set out on the return trip.

So if Laban was ready to trade his own sister for some of the gifts carried on Abraham's camels that makes me wonder about the things that I can become fixated upon. For what might I even be willing to trade my sister Tori, sacrifice my son Eli, or damage other important relationships? The gifts Laban sought could represent all kinds of things in our lives: riches, identity, influence. They could represent our commitment to a particular kind of politics or our desperation for a particular kind of stability. A house, a car, or a promotion are often the goods for which relationships are sacrificed. Stories of need and want and scarcity can lead us to make culturally appropriate but relationally damaging choices, no matter what our actual circumstances.

But there's a second point of view offered in today's narrative. That's the viewpoint of Abraham's servant, Eliezer. Eliezer could have told a story about how he had been Abraham's heir until this unlikely son was born to Sarah at the age of 100. Eliezer could have told the story of the arduous and dangerous journey he had just made. Eliezer had assembled a caravan of ten camels, brought them across great distances, defended the gifts they carried from thieves and bandits along the way, only to fall into the clutches of the treacherous Laban. Eliezer would have standing to make a complaint or two.

Instead, Eliezer chose to tell stories not about his own hardships, his own faithfulness, his own perseverance and sacrifice, but the God of promise introduced to him by Abraham. Eliezer told Laban about how Abraham was not just rich, but was blessed by God. The key to Abraham's success was not that he was a hard worker, a mighty warrior, or uncommonly lucky. Abraham had a relationship with the God of promise, and that God cared for Abraham.

Similarly, Eliezer told about his own experience of the God of promise, how God answered Eliezer's own cry for help that very day right outside of town at the well. Eliezer had inherited not Abraham's wealth, but something better. Eliezer inherited Abraham's connection to the living God of promise, and that's the story we hear him telling in today's reading. Eliezer's eyes were opened and he saw God at work in the world. Eliezer knew that he did not encounter Rebekah by coincidence. He didn't arrive at the well at that time simply by his own intelligence, hard work, and effort. Eliezer, like Abraham before him, experienced first-hand the blessing of God and success in the endeavor to which God had called him.

There are some hard things going on in our world and in our individual lives. Few of us remain untouched by sadness or tragedy for very long. Child sacrifice, the sacrifice of all kinds of relationships, is still an epidemic in our world, even if we're more subtle about it than Abraham was. But even in the midst of everything, the God of Abraham, the God of promise, continues to call out to us. God invites us to find meaning and purpose both in the good things in life and in the difficult things.

This, by the way, is what church is all about. As Church we gather to tell our stories and consider how even an ancient story like that of Rebekah and Eliezer and Laban might have something to say for us today. In church we learn and practice the telling of stories of the God of promise and how that God has removed scarcity from our lives not necessarily by showering us with everything we desire, but by teaching us how to love one another and to rest in God's sure promises.

Like Abraham and Isaac, we may swim in the same basic water as everyone around us. But as Christians we believe, like Abraham and Isaac, that the deeper reality of God's goodness can shine through every circumstance and be known as the deeper truth of our lives. It is that truth that enables us to tell a different story.

The stories we tell reflect our connection to that which is deepest within us.

Do we tell stories like Laban did, about scarcity and domination and taking advantage of others? Or do we tell stories like Eliezer did, about the God of promise whose yoke is easy, knowing that the Kingdom of God is a perfectly safe place to be?

It's not the circumstances that are determinative of the experience of a life: it is the stories we tell about them.

Sermon Questions:

1. Where have you seen tragedy which contained within it the seeds of something good?
2. What kinds of stories do you typically tell about the events and circumstances of your life?
3. Where or from whom have you learned to tell stories in a different way?