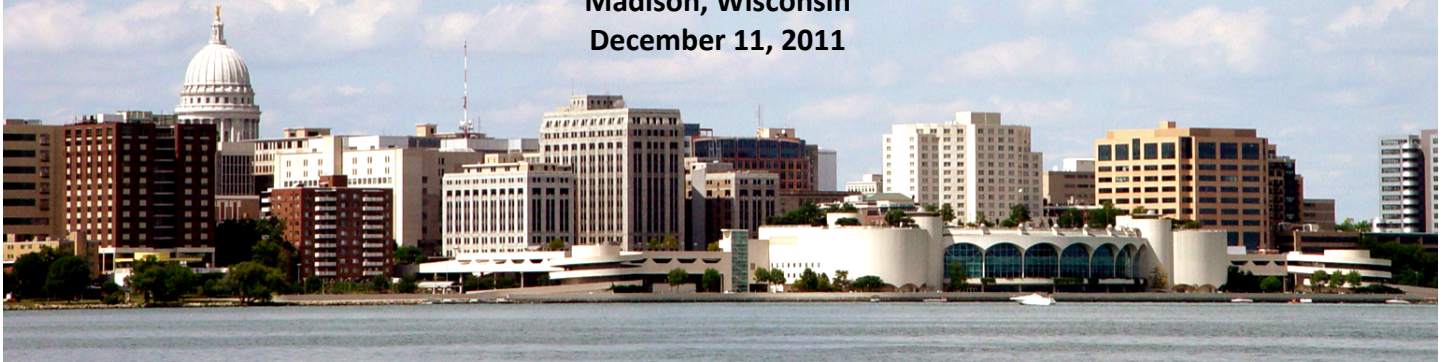


“Isaac: Redigging the Wells”

GENESIS 26:1-33

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If you were here with us last Sunday morning, then you might remember that we took some time to study a scene from the life of Abraham, a scene recorded for us in Genesis 22. I hope that all of you have had a chance to look at some of the artwork on the back bulletin board. But as most of you know, we studied the sacrifice of Isaac. We learned that Abraham’s faith was tested, we learned that Abraham passed the test (although it was quite difficult), and we learned that God then blessed Abraham not only by providing a ram as a last-minute substitution, but also by renewing the covenant, the promise that God would bless all the nations of the earth through one of Abraham’s descendants, which, of course, was a reference to Jesus. We then studied some of the amazing parallels between the offering of Isaac and the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

This morning, with these things in mind, I would like for us to move ahead as we now consider a scene from the life of Isaac. God, of course, is often identified as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We will study this in more detail on December 25, two weeks from this morning, but in the meantime, we are actually looking at Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And right here as we begin, I should point out that Isaac is rather unique. He is the son of a famous father (Abraham), and he is the father of a famous son (Jacob). Isaac, however, is not as well known. There are basically thirteen chapters in Genesis detailing the life of Abraham, and there are basically ten chapters describing the life of Jacob. Abraham and Jacob are major characters in the Bible. But when we start looking for information on Isaac, we find that there is really only one chapter where the focus is almost exclusively on Isaac, and that chapter is Genesis 26 (p. 39). In Genesis 26, we are about to find that Isaac faced some serious challenges.

We think about our lives: Sometimes we could almost write our life history and divide it into chapters based on the challenges we have faced. Sometimes the highlights or the defining moments are closely tied to how we handled various challenges. And it seems that this is the case with Isaac—we have one chapter telling us who this man is, and it is a turbulent passage. This morning, then, as we study our spiritual heritage, I would like for us to focus on Isaac as we try to learn something from God’s word, as we try to figure out why God preserved this chapter for us to study together this morning, nearly 4000 years after the events described here first took place.

- I. **And as we begin, I would like for us to notice that ISAAC WAS BLESSED BY GOD IN SPITE OF SOME VERY DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES (verses 1-17).**

As we get to the blessing, we will notice some background here, and as we look at this paragraph, I would like for us to keep our eyes open for some serious parallels between what Isaac went through and what Abraham went through, and I would like for us to notice how Isaac had apparently grown up with his eyes open. In other words, Isaac had been watching and learning from his father. If you will, let's look together at verses 1-17,

¹ Now there was a famine in the land, besides the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham. So Isaac went to Gerar, to Abimelech king of the Philistines. ² The LORD appeared to him and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land of which I shall tell you. ³ Sojourn in this land and I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham. ⁴ I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; ⁵ because Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws."

⁶ So Isaac lived in Gerar. ⁷ When the men of the place asked about his wife, he said, "She is my sister," for he was afraid to say, "my wife," thinking, "the men of the place might kill me on account of Rebekah, for she is beautiful." ⁸ It came about, when he had been there a long time, that Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out through a window, and saw, and behold, Isaac was caressing his wife Rebekah. ⁹ Then Abimelech called Isaac and said, "Behold, certainly she is your wife! How then did you say, 'She is my sister'?" And Isaac said to him, "Because I said, 'I might die on account of her.'" ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ So Abimelech charged all the people, saying, "He who touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death."

¹² Now Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. And the LORD blessed him, ¹³ and the man became rich, and continued to grow richer until he became very wealthy; ¹⁴ for he had possessions of flocks and herds and a great household, so that the Philistines envied him. ¹⁵ Now all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines stopped up by filling them with earth. ¹⁶ Then Abimelech said to Isaac, "Go away from us, for you are too powerful for us." ¹⁷ And Isaac departed from there and camped in the valley of Gerar, and settled there.

We have several things going on here, and both are challenges that Isaac faced: We have adversity in the form of a famine, and we have adversity of Isaac's own making, but in both situations, God was able to bless him in spite of the circumstances. And we don't have enough time to go into any great detail here, but first we have the famine, something very similar to what Abraham faced, and you might remember that Abraham actually went to Egypt. We find here that Isaac tried to do the same thing; I mean, if you need to feed and water your flocks and herds, and if you cannot find food and water where you are, you obviously need to move, and that is what Isaac tried to do. However, God stepped in and told him not to move but to stay right there where he was. Now, from an earthly point of view, that did not make sense; however, God wanted Isaac to stay in the Promised Land. So, Isaac stays.

But as he stays, he runs into Abimelech, the king of the Philistines, and we find here that Isaac continues to follow the example of his own father. Twice in his life, Abraham lied in a very similar way because he was

scared of what the locals might do take his beautiful wife. Abraham had lied once to Pharaoh and once to Abimelech. Now, I guess it is possible that this is the same king (maybe this guy is 200 years old or something), but there is another possibility. From what I have read, the name Abimelech means, “my father is king.” Well, you see how that name could easily be passed down (almost as a title) from generation to generation. But it is interesting that Isaac did virtually the same thing that Abraham had done by lying to the king. However, the king happens to see Isaac and Rebekah *“caressing”* each other, and he figures it out! But instead of a punishment, the king issues a decree: Anyone who touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death. So, here is what seems to be a blessing from God (an order of protection), even in a stressful situation that Isaac had basically brought upon himself.

But there is a deeper lesson in the fact that God told Isaac to stay in spite of the famine. That right there was huge challenge to Isaac’s faith. But in verse 12 we start to see the results. The normal yield for crops at that time was maybe 25 or so; that is, if you planted one kernel of corn, you would get 25 or maybe 50 back. However, please notice what happens: Even in a famine (a famine that was most likely caused by a severe drought), we find in verse 12 that Isaac sowed seed that year, and he brought in 100 times what he had planted! And please remember: Isaac was a nomad; Isaac was not a farmer, but here he plants what is perhaps his very first crop ever (he is a rookie farmer), and the yield is 100 times what is planted. But then there is something else that makes this significant, and it comes with what Isaac was able to do with that crop. Not only could he feed his own flocks, but he surely would have sold it for a huge profit. Remember: Nobody else has any crops! And so not only did he have a good year in terms of the yield, but the yield itself was also far more valuable because of the drought. The law of supply and demand kicks in. A little bit of capitalism kicks in. So, we notice in verse 13 that Isaac *“became rich and continued to grow richer until he became very wealthy.”* And it even got to the point (in verse 14) that the Philistines started to envy him. This, by the way, is the first time that the word *“envy”* is ever found in the Bible. They *“envied”* Isaac, but instead of setting up camp on Wall Street and protesting, we find in verse 15 that the Philistines allowed their envy grow in their hearts and they filled in the wells that Abraham had dug in that area many years earlier (the first reference to vandalism in the Bible). Their hope, of course, was that Isaac would no longer be able to water his flocks and his crops, and that he would then be brought down like the rest of them. Instead of applying for jobs with Isaac, they tried to pull him down. The king then asked Isaac to leave, and he did.

As we try to apply this to our situation today, it seems there might be a lesson in the fact that God has the ability to take care of His people in some very stressful situations. Even when the future looks bleak, even when we cannot see a way out of whatever trouble we may be in, God has the ability to see a way through it. And like He said to Isaac, sometimes the answer may involve digging in and trusting God to help us right there where we are. God can take care of His people, even in a bad economy, even in a drought, even in a challenging home situation, even in a class where a teacher seems intent on destroying our faith in God. God has the ability to bless us even in adversity. We might even say that God has the power to provide for us, and again, isn’t this something that Isaac would have known from his own experience? I am sure that Isaac had learned something after being tied up and nearly sacrificed by his own father, only to be stopped by an angel at the very last second. Isaac learned that God can take care of us. So, when Isaac starts heading down to Egypt to provide for his family, and God tells him to stay put and that He would provide for him, Isaac took God at His word and trusted God to make things right, as He did. It must have taken a lot of faith to plant seed in a dusty field, but Isaac obeyed, and God took care of the rest. And we see that so often in the Bible: Dip seven times in the Jordan River, march around the city of Jericho, go and borrow empty vessels from your neighbors (not a few), roll the stone away from the mouth of the tomb, fill the jars with water, and on and on and on. God wants to bless us, even in difficult circumstances. Isaac was blessed in spite of adversity!

- II. There is a second basic lesson we can learn from Isaac in this chapter, and that is: **ISAAC WAS INCREDIBLY PATIENT AS HE WAS BEING ABUSED AND MISTREATED BY THE LOCALS** (verses 18-22).

If you will, let us please notice what happens next. The Philistines have filled in his wells, the king has asked him to leave, and we pick up with verses 18-22,

¹⁸ Then Isaac dug again the wells of water which 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 same names which his father had given them. ¹⁹ But when Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found there a well of flowing water, ²⁰the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with the herdsmen of Isaac, saying, "The water is ours!" So he named the well Esek, because they contended with him. ²¹ Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over it too, so he named it Sitnah. ²² He moved away from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he named it Rehoboth, for he said, "At last the LORD has made room for us, and we will be fruitful in the land."

So the conflict here is over water. Most of us do not really think much about our water today, especially those of us living in the city. We get our water bill once every six months, so I guess we think about the source of our water twice a year, but it is really not too much of a daily concern for us. We lift the faucet and it comes out! It has been fun watching them build a new water tower on our side of town the past few weeks. They are replacing our old water tower that caught on fire last year. That's a completely different story, but for the most part, we are not very concerned about our water. But for Isaac, this was a matter of life and death, and to dig a well was incredibly hard work. In fact, historians tell us that digging a well was basically a way of claiming ownership of the land where the well was located. We might even compare it to planting a flag. The explorers come to shore and jam that flag in the sand on the beach, "I am claiming this land for so-and-so," or whatever. Digging a well was kind of like that. You scope out a piece of land, and if you take the time and effort to dig a well, then that land was yours. It was basically the same as having a deed to the property. And then on the other hand, to fill in someone's well was often considered an act of war. Even at the least, to fill in a well was one way of sending a powerful message, it was an act of vandalism, and the message was, "We do not want you people around here. Go home!"

So with that in mind, we find that Isaac re-digs the wells that his father Abraham had dug. He also gives them the same names that his father Abraham had given to them. In other words, Isaac was reclaiming the land that his father had once settled. Not only that, but Isaac and his people start digging some new wells. However, instead of recognizing this, instead of being thankful, instead of trying to work out some kind of arrangement, we find here that the locals retaliate. They start arguing, "Oh no you don't! This land is not your land!" They protest. They fight and argue and challenge each new well. Isaac and his people do the work, and then the local herdsmen step in, "The water is ours!" The locals object, and Isaac moves on. This happens several times, so they give the wells names that reflect each situation. The first they name "**Esek**," a word referring to "contention" or a "fight." The second well is named "**Sitnah**," a word meaning "hostility" or "opposition." By the way, this is the same root for our English word "Satan." Literally, Satan is our "adversary." Satan stands in "opposition" to us; that is what his name really means, and this was also the name given to this particular well. So, Isaac moved on again until there was no opposition.

At first glance, we might be tempted to think that Isaac was being a little bit of a coward here. It is easy to think that perhaps he should have fought back a little bit. But then again, remember that Isaac was a man with

many flocks and herds, and remember also that Isaac makes it all the way through this chapter without ever being physically attacked. Yes, it must have been tense, there might have been some hurt feelings, there was certainly a lot of work involved, but Isaac trusted the Lord to provide, and so he just kept on moving. Not a single casualty. I don't think Isaac was weak here; I think Isaac was faithful. With great patience, Isaac kept on doing what he needed to do, even in the face of opposition. When our son took karate classes years ago, the teacher taught the class that one way to avoid a fight is to not be there when the first punch is thrown. In class, he referred to making a "planned retreat" or a "strategic retreat."

What impresses me here is that Isaac does not get discouraged. As far as we can tell, Isaac does not whine and complain, but he moves on, he picks up a shovel, and he starts digging a new well, over and over again. What an amazing example! Instead of wasting time arguing about it or feeling sorry for himself, Isaac kept on digging! I am reminded of what brother Jerry Jenkins said when he came up here and told us about some of the opposition he had heard through the years concerning his method of going door-to-door to reach people with the gospel. Brother Jenkins' standard reply to that line of criticism was, "I like how I'm doing it better than the way you're not doing it!" And then he went right back to knocking doors. And again, we may disagree about how effective it is to teach the gospel from house to house like Paul did in Ephesus, but we cannot argue about brother Jenkins' enthusiasm for doing the Lord's work. It seems that Isaac had that same kind of attitude: Patient when wronged. We can learn from that. Life is not fair, but the question is: What are we going to do about it? Will we constantly look back and get bitter, or will we press ahead like Isaac?

III. There is a third concept we can learn from the life of Isaac in this chapter, and it comes with the fact that ISAAC ENDED UP BEING A GREAT BLESSING TO HIS NEIGHBORS (verses 26-33).

And no, we are not skipping a section—we'll get to that in just a moment—but for now, let us go down and notice what happens with the neighbors (verses 26-33),

²⁶ Then Abimelech came to him from Gerar with his adviser Ahuzzath and Phicol the commander of his army. ²⁷ Isaac said to them, "Why have you come to me, since you hate me and have sent me away from you?" ²⁸ They said, "We see plainly that the LORD has been with you; so we said, 'Let there now be an oath between us, even between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you, ²⁹ 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.'" ³⁰ Then he made them a feast, and they ate and drank. ³¹ In the morning they arose early and exchanged oaths; then Isaac sent them away and they departed from him in peace. ³² Now it came about on the same day, that Isaac's servants came in and told him about the well which they had dug, and said to him, "We have found water." ³³ So he called it Shibah; therefore the name of the city is Beersheba to this day.

Isn't it interesting, after everything that has happened so far in this chapter, the king comes to Isaac and now he wants peace! They have stopped up his wells, they have driven them off of their land, and now they want to be friends! The reason is given in verse 29 as we find that it was obvious to these people that Isaac had been "**blessed**" by the Lord. To me, it seems that these guys were starting to get a little scared. But even if so, they are scared of Isaac (they respect Isaac, we might say), because it is obvious that Isaac is different. It is obvious that Isaac has some kind of very close relationship with some kind of Higher Power. I mean, here is a guy who can grow a bumper crop in the middle of a drought. Here is a guy who finds water every time he digs a well in the desert! And all of these good things are happening as Isaac is being harassed! They finally realized

that they could not stop God from blessing this man as hard as they might have tried. No matter what they did, Isaac kept getting stronger. There was something special about this man.

Today we might notice Isaac as someone who was bearing the fruit of the Spirit, ***“...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”*** I don’t know about you, but I have noticed some of those qualities in Isaac in this chapter, and those things caused Isaac’s neighbors to pay attention. Perhaps they finally realized that the powerful God of Abraham was also the God of Isaac. So, as a result, they come to an agreement, they make an oath, and then they eat together. We certainly remember Paul’s words in Romans 12:18, ***“If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.”***

This morning, maybe we can take just a moment to think about how we view our own neighbors, our own co-workers, our own classmates at school. Do we know these people by accident, or did God have some part in bringing us together? Is it possible that they will notice how we live, and is it possible that God will bless them because of us? Or maybe I could ask: Is there an Abimelech in your life? Let us live each day as Isaac did, looking for ways that we might be able to bless our neighbors.

IV. Before we close, there is one other section we need to go back and look at this morning: I am referring to verses 23-25 where we discover that ISAAC, LIKE HIS FATHER ABRAHAM, IS ALSO A WORSHIPER OF GOD.

Let us please notice what happens in verses 23-25,

²³ Then he [Isaac] went up from there to Beersheba. ²⁴ The LORD appeared to him the same night and said, “I am the God of your father Abraham; do not fear, for I am with you. I will bless you, and multiply your descendants, for the sake of My servant Abraham.” ²⁵ So he built an altar there and called upon the name of the LORD, and pitched his tent there; and there Isaac’s servants dug a well.

Of all people who ever built an altar, I cannot think of anyone who would have been more thankful for offering a substitute than Isaac. We remember it was Isaac who was tied up and was nearly offered as a sacrifice himself as a teenager, and that is significant. So here he is in Beersheba, which is the same place where God met Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness. There is something else I would like to point out—it may or may not be significant—but please notice what seems to be a slight shift in something God said to Isaac at the beginning of this chapter as opposed to the end. Up in verse 3, before all of this started, God said, ***“I will be with you,”*** but please notice what God says in verse 24, ***“Do not fear, for I AM with you.”*** In other words, before it was a promise, but now it is a reality. God then repeats the promise, and Isaac builds an altar. Through all of this, Isaac has grown closer to God. Through adversity, Isaac’s relationship with God is now much deeper than it was before. His father’s faith is now his own.

Isaac was a man of great faith. Sometimes we overlook this. With only one chapter in the book of Genesis, sometimes we might be tempted to forget. And yet, as was read for us earlier, the Bible says that Abraham was not the only one who ***“...lived by faith as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land,”*** but rather, the Bible says that Abraham lived ***“...in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”*** Abraham we know, but the Bible says that Isaac and Jacob also lived by faith and demonstrated that faith by living in tents, knowing that they were never really at home in this world. And then at the end, imagine this, Isaac digs another well!

Conclusion:

As we close, one thing I really appreciate about Isaac is that he seems more like most of us here this morning. He is not some kind of hero almost out of our reach—he is not like Moses, or David, or Peter, or Paul—but Isaac seems like more of an everyday Bible character. Isaac was more of a blue-collar kind of guy. There wasn't some kind of huge heroic act, but it was more a matter of just doing what needed to be done and doing it consistently over a long period of time. God needs people like Isaac, and that is our challenge this morning, to be like Isaac, not necessarily perfect, but trusting God in difficult circumstances, patient when wronged, a blessing to our neighbors, and faithful in our worship of God.

Beyond this invitation to be more like Isaac, we would also like to invite those of you who have not yet obeyed the gospel to do so this morning. If you have any questions, let us know, but the Bible teaches that we must repent of our sins, and then we must put on Christ in baptism so that our sins will be covered by the blood of Christ. If you are ready to take that step, we would invite you to let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com