

**5 Pentecost  
July 9, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

Last week I mentioned that I had written a sermon about Abraham and his almost sacrifice of his beloved son Isaac. This isn't that sermon, but it is about the long arc of a family story that begins with Abraham and Sarah. Last week we heard about Abraham's almost sacrifice of Isaac. Isaac wasn't killed by his father. He grew up. And in this morning's reading from Genesis we heard how Rebekah became Isaac's wife. These are just part of the epic saga we are reading week after week this summer. Unfortunately, it is like reading Cliff's Notes of the Book of Genesis only one page at a time, and then separated by a week before the next page is read.

The story began with Abram ... as he was called then ... hearing a voice from God telling him to take his wife Sarai and leave his home in Ur of the Chaldeans (modern day Iraq) so that he might become the father of a great nation. What follows is a story of family dysfunction, favoritism and jealousy, backstabbing and downright fraud. But it is also a story of divine grace and redemption.

Abram's father was Terah, and Abram had two brothers, Nahor and Haran. According to some extra-Biblical sources ... sources other than the Bible ... Abram's father, Terah, carved idols of the gods ... gods of fire, water, air, earth, sun, and moon. As Abraham was growing up he worked in his father's shop selling these idols, but he started hearing a voice in his head. First the voice said there was only one god ... not six or more. And secondly, the voice told him to leave his home and journey westward. Abram left his father's shop and followed the voice he heard in his head.

After Abram and Sarai had settled in their new homeland they wanted to start a family ... after all, Abram could not be the father of a great nation if he had no heirs. Of course, we know that Sarai could not have children so Abram's dream was frustrated. With no real alternative Sarai offered Abram her slave-girl for him to sleep with, and the slave-girl, Hagar, had a son, Ishmael. Then, miracle upon miracle, Sarai became pregnant and then had a son, Isaac. Sarah (as she is now called), with a child of her own, became jealous of Hagar and Ishmael living in the same tent and ordered Abraham (as he was now called) to banish them to the wilderness. This part of the story we heard a few weeks ago.

I should add that later in the story, after Abraham's wife Sarah dies, he took another wife, Keturah, and she gave Abraham six more sons. One of the final exam questions in my Old Testament class ... some 45 years ago ... was "Who is Keturah, and name her six sons." I remember the question ... I know who Keturah is, but there is no way that I remember the six sons of Keturah.

Anyhow, last week we heard the portion of the story where a voice from God told Abraham to kill his only son ... to offer Isaac as a sacrifice ... the precious son whose conception was a miracle. Isaac's life was spared when, at the last minute, God provided a goat for the sacrifice instead of Isaac. I mentioned last week that I would preach the sermon I wrote about Abraham and Isaac at some point ... this isn't that sermon, but it has bits and pieces of it.

Then in this week's reading heard about the arranged marriage of Isaac and Rebekah, and next week it is about Rebekah having twins ... Jacob and Esau. Most people know at least a little of this story ... Esau was born first and Jacob came out of his mother's womb holding onto Esau's heel. Esau, the oldest by a few seconds, is entitled to the family estate upon his father's death. Esau grows up to be a hunter and a man of the fields ... and he was his father's favorite. Jacob was a homebody ... and he was his mother's favorite. It is obvious that the twins were not close ... indeed there was a rivalry between the two. And Rebekah and her son Jacob conspired to rob Esau of his birthright by defrauding Isaac in his old age. Fair skinned Jacob covers himself with a fur like coat while his mother cooks a stew of wild game. Isaac is nearly blind so he believes it is Esau bringing him the meal ... and he blesses Jacob instead of Esau with the birthright ... the inheritance that was due his older brother.

When Esau found out what had been done he drove Jacob into exile in the land of his mother's kin. While in exile Jacob worked for his uncle Laban, then fell in love with Laban's daughter Rachel ... his cousin. Jacob made a deal with his uncle Laban to marry Rachel in exchange for seven years' hard labor. After seven long years there is a big wedding party. However, Jacob had a little too much to drink and the next morning he woke up to in bed with Leah ... Rachel's homely sister. His uncle Laban had deceived Jacob.

Not to be outdone, Jacob worked another seven years to get the hand of Rachel ... but Jacob also used the time to plot against Laban. After his seven years of hard labor ... again ... he does have Rachel for a bride ... his second wife. But in an act of fraud and trickery Jacob became wealthy at the expense of his father-in-law Laban. It is an amazing story of animal husbandry and selective breeding some 4,000 years ago ... in the end, Jacob had turned the tables on his uncle and father-in-law Laban.

Jacob had 12 sons by Leah and Rachel ... his two wives. The youngest ... Rachel's son ... and his favorite ... was Joseph. Joseph ... as in Joseph and the coat of many colors ... Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. Because Joseph was his father's favorite ... in spite of being the youngest ... his brothers were jealous of their younger brother and they plotted to kill him. They were going to throw Joseph in a pit in the wilderness take his coat ... the coat of many colors ... and smear it with blood, and then tell their father a wild beast had killed his favorite son. However, a caravan of traders going to Egypt just happened to be passing and the minds of the brothers turned greedy when they saw the profit they could make by selling Joseph to the traders as a slave.

There is much, much more to this story. Joseph rises to prominence and power in Egypt and in the end rescues his family from a famine in their homeland. This is how the Israelites get to Egypt, and this is how the Book of Genesis ends. But this is basically the Abraham, Isaac, Jacob saga. A story filled with family dysfunction, deceit, back-stabbing, favoritism and jealousy. But also divine grace and redemption.

Now, when I read this "holy" Bible, I don't normally expect stories about infertility, obstetrics, genealogy, legal wills, animal husbandry, and family dysfunction. The story of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, feels like walking into a county court house and sifting through musty boxes of birth certificates, death notices, marriage licenses, records of lawsuits, medical histories of family pathology, and resentful letters never meant to be read by others. Yet I believe that therein lies the story of our own redemption today. Divine grace and redemption was present for our spiritual ancestors, and sometimes divine grace and redemption meets us in our own flawed family histories.

These are the stories of the ancestors of our faith. Why would anyone want to record these stories of dysfunctional family life in telling the reader about God's relationship to the world? It is easy to read these stories and either discount them as having happened in a different time and place and culture and so explain them away, or be critical of them by imposing our sense of morality upon the situation from some 4,000 years ago. But the question for me is how do I know this story in my own life? And what are these stories telling me about God and our relationship to God?

As many of you know, I am the oldest of six living children in my family. I have two sisters and three living brothers ... one of my brothers died as an infant of polio. When my siblings and I were growing up my parents did "family" things. We went to the Museum of Natural History, and the Bronx Zoo, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. After one winter of family ski trips my folks took us all to a Sunday matinee at a show on Broadway. I was walking with crutches, my brother Chad had a cast on his arm, and my sister was in a wheelchair recovering from surgery. They let us all in for free. They thought my parents were taking some children from a local hospital on a field trip.

When I was fifteen my father converted an old school bus into a primitive motor home and we drove across the country. This was in 1959 before hippies took the idea to a new level. At times one might have imagined the Voorhees clan as walking out of a Norman Rockwell Saturday Evening Post cover painting.

However, all of us grew up ... including my parents ... and instead of acting like adults we all have shown our share of emotional immaturity. My family is not immune to sibling rivalry, intense disputes that have isolated members from each other for years, and just plain family ugliness. My parents were married for 53 years when my father died. Of my parents six surviving children there have been seven divorces. One brother is in his fourth marriage, and

another brother's third wife died last fall. Only my youngest brother and his wife are still in their first marriage. When one of my brothers divorced his first wife my parents did not speak to him for years, and when his ex-wife remarried it was my father who walked her down the aisle.

I'm not here to air my dirty laundry, but I have a feeling that many of you have similar stories in your extended families. The stories of Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Rachel have found echoes in all generations since they were recorded in the Book of Genesis ... and I imagine that they will continue.

For me that is the point. Not that one has to suffer to find God, but that God is ever-present ... even in the dysfunction ... even in the suffering ... especially in our everyday life. God was present in the life of Abraham and Sarah and the dysfunction of their extended family ... and God is present in our lives as well.

None of the players in this saga of Abraham and his family come off well. They explode the myth of so-called Biblical "family values." But we can take encouragement. These people and their families look, feel, sound and act suspiciously like our own. Yet God worked mightily through the statistical improbabilities and practical challenges of infertility, multiple births and deviant behavior. In God's gracious hands the incidental, the accidental and the ordinary become the material of redemptive history, both in ancient Israel and in our own families today.

Last week Caren and I had dinner with Al Stefanik and his wife Claire ... Al filled in for me a few weeks ago while Caren and I were in Europe. We had not met, so dinner was about getting to know each other. In a subsequent email he wrote: "I was intrigued by our conversation of backgrounds, professional and genetic and familial and I had a thought on the way home. In some way to really get an understanding of what it is all about, we have first to go through the craziness inherent in Creation. That is the lesson of Genesis, methinks. I have to give this question some thought: Is it the case that those with compassion and wide scope of acceptance are those who have experienced craziness and come through that trial. It seems the case to me. There are those who want a Dick and Jane world (respectably neat), and [then there are] those who accept the messiness and try to make the best of it. Hence Genesis. [Respectably neat people] limit community ... [while] messy people accept all kinds. How is that for a once and for all summation of the situation we live with ... in the church and without?"

We have a tendency to read these ancient stories from our Bible and discount them as having happened in a different place and time and culture. Or we dismiss them as we try to impose our 21<sup>st</sup> century moralistic views upon situations that happened 4,000 years ago. The fact is that they are stories of how God has worked his redemptive love through even the most strange of circumstances ... and continues to do so today. All too often we want to look for God in the sterile and sacred and holy places and yet fail to see God at work in our ordinary, even profane lives.

We are all beloved children of God, made in God's image. Life isn't just about being good and living a blessed life ... it is about living all of life ... in all its richness. And it means finding God in even in the midst of a family squabble. We are the family of God. Look around you at your own family and find the richness of God's grace even in those strange circumstances.

Amen.