

Genesis 21:22-34

This morning we are returning to our study of the Life of Abraham which we began at the end of last year and which we will be drawing to a close over the next couple weeks. In our study of Abraham's life we have watched as God has chosen this man, out of all humanity, and set him apart with purpose and poured out his blessings upon him.

At the same time, while God has been demonstrating this un-deserved faithfulness, we have watched as Abraham has *responded* with a *variable* faithfulness - sometimes being very strong and at other times being pitifully weak. Nevertheless, God has patiently stuck with his chosen servant and seen him through a number of situations and now, after 25 plus years, we are seeing not only the working out of God's promises to Abraham, but also the fruit of God's work *within* Abraham. To be sure, Abraham has not "arrived" spiritually, but he is growing stronger and learning more and more how to trust God with all of his life. And not a moment too soon as, in the next chapter, he will be faced with the greatest test of faith of his entire life.

But we'll see more about that in a couple weeks time. Before we turn to the passage before us this morning, let's pray together.....

Father in heaven, hear us now as we approach you in prayer and as we ask for your blessing upon this time. We ask for the blessing of peace and calm - that we might not be distracted by other things that draw our attentions from you. We ask for the blessing of faith - faith to believe that you do speak to and feed and nurture your people through your Word and that by this means we come to know you better. We ask for the blessing of illumination as your Spirit takes these words and interprets them to our hearts in ways that go beyond mere understanding. Father we ask for all these blessings in this moment, and we do so that you might receive the honor that is rightly yours. In Jesus' name, Amen.

(Read passage)

As this passage opens up, we see a man named Abimelech - a leader of a neighboring tribe of people - coming to Abraham, asking for *peace*. He knows who Abraham is. And he knows where Abraham stands with God. If you were with us for previous messages on the life of Abraham then you may remember that this is the same Abimelech that, in chapter 20, unwittingly took Abraham's wife for himself and who, as a result, heard directly from God on that matter. And one of the things that God *told* Abimelech was that Abraham was a prophet, and that if Abraham prayed to God on Abimelech's behalf, he - God - would listen. So, there is no doubt in Abimelech's mind that Abraham - for reasons that probably baffle him - is not a guy you should mess with. This is not a guy you want to be on the bad side of.

At the same time, Abimelech knew that Abraham was also not a guy who could be trusted. He learned that one the hard way, hadn't he? It was Abraham who had concealed his wife's true identity and, as a result, placed Abimelech in the dangerous and awkward situation in which he found himself on their previous encounter.

And so, with this in mind, and knowing of God's commitment to Abraham, Abimelech

comes to him seeking some sort of concrete commitment not to bring harm upon him. He wants to take steps to insure that there are no further troubles between them. There was simply too much at stake to just leave these things to chance.

And notice what Abimelech asks Abraham to do. He doesn't just say to him, "Promise me that you will not do us any harm". He says "...swear to me here *by God* that you will not deal falsely with me..." Because he knows that God is with Abraham, he brings God into the deal. And Abraham agrees to what Abimelech asks and promises not to deal falsely with him or his descendants.

What follows this then is an immediate test and demonstration of this commitment they have made to each other. Now we don't know if what Abraham says in verse 25 took place right on the heels of what he has just said, or whether it was a confrontation that took place some time after that. I suspect it was the latter. But whenever it took place, it is clear that from the way that Moses has kept these things together in the text that he wants us to see how their agreement worked itself out in real life.

And the thing you should not miss here is the very forthright, up front way in which Abraham has brought this thing to Abimelech which, frankly, is a little surprising. This is the same Abraham who, on previous occasions, at the first hint or suggestion or even *possibility* of trouble he has resorted to deception and dealing with things in anything BUT a straightforward fashion.

However, here Abraham takes a more direct and honest approach to dealing with a potential difficulty. And in doing so, what we are seeing, I believe, is an indicator - not a huge indicator - but an *indicator* nonetheless, that Abraham is learning, that he is growing, that he is changing and becoming more forthright and learning to trust God better.

And so he speaks directly to Abimelech about a problem that had arisen over a certain well. And, to his credit once again, Abimelech responds honorably to this situation, and appears to be as shocked and dismayed by what was happening as Abraham. And Abraham must have seen Abimelech's response and judged it to be genuine for in the next verse we see him taking steps to address the problem and settle things peacefully.

Even though it would appear that it was Abimelech's people that had wrongly seized a well for themselves which Abraham felt belonged to him, for the sake of peace Abraham goes the extra mile and "pays" for the well which was already his and he does so by giving a gift of sheep and oxen to Abimelech.

But he does not only pay for the well, he goes even further to more formally strengthen their peaceful relations and to insure that there is no further trouble over this well by making a covenant with Abimelech. He sets apart seven ewe lambs - presumably to be used in a sacrificial ceremony, although the text does not make this clear - and declares that this act will stand as a "witness" or "testimony" to the fact that the well over which there had arisen a dispute did in fact belong to Abraham and that he was the one who had dug it in the first place.

So they do this and make a covenant - or agreement - and that event, the writer tells us, is

the source of the name that was attributed to that place: Beersheba which is a kind of pun that can mean “well of the seven” or “well of the oath”.

After the covenant is made, Abimelech and the commander of his army return to their home and Abraham plants a *tamarisk* tree there - which is a sign of permanence and stability, a sign that Abraham is quite literally putting some “roots” down in that place, settling down. It is at this point in the text where we are also told that, in addition to planting this tree, Abraham “called on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God”. In other words, Abraham worshiped God in that place which, if you remember from the earlier chapters of the Abraham story was a practice that had characterized and defined his movements at the very beginning - setting up sites for worship as he went along from place to place.

And that is where the text leaves us - with a picture of a more mature Abraham, a settled Abraham, a peaceful Abraham who has a son, and who deals forthrightly with his neighbors, and who trusts in the Lord’s promises and worships the Lord his God.

Now, as we think about the significance of this passage for the Church today, I want to focus on what I think, in light of the whole movement of the Abraham narrative, is the *major* theme as well as taking time to look at what is a lesser, but still significant, *minor* theme.

In terms of the major theme, it seems to me that this passage has been preserved for us in Scripture so that we get a glimpse, brief though it may be, of Abraham on the other side of a very long and trying period of time. Through this fairly uneventful narrative - which consists of a minor dispute over a well and a peace agreement between two peoples - we are afforded the chance to see how, over time, Abraham has begun to change and grow and is learning that God can be trusted to fulfill his many promises. We see him deal with a potential threat and conflict in a forthright and open manner - and not in worldly, under-handed, or deceptive fashion. And we see the good result that came from that.

To frame this in other language - what we see here is that God’s being faithful to his people is not only concerned with what he will do *for* them but also with what he will do *within* them. Part of the outworking of God’s faithfulness to us is that he makes *us* faithful as well. He teaches us how to trust him, and places us in circumstances where that trust can be learned.

And, just as we have seen with Abraham, that sort of trust is not something that is learned in an instant. Believing that God will be true to His Word is not something that you learn in three easy lessons or ten simple steps. Trusting God is the lesson of a lifetime and can only be learned in the crucible of life. Trust is only tested and learned and grown in circumstances where the pressure is on, and the consequences are great, and choices have to be made and where, behind the various options before us are opportunities to express our confidence in God’s faithfulness to his promises, or, alternatively, situations where we will choose to place our confidence in a variety of other things which, ultimately, boil down to a choice to trust ourselves more than God.

But the encouraging thing, as we look at the life of Abraham, is that because God IS faithful then He CAN be trusted and he WILL bring to completion the good thing he has begun in you and me. When we look at the life of Abraham, we can see times of great faith and times of

great faithLESSness. But we can also see beyond the isolated incidents and detect an overall pattern that shows him growing in his ability and willingness to trust God, to lean harder and harder upon him and know that God can indeed do all that he promises.

And that ought to be a great source of encouragement for us today for we are no less the people of God than Abraham. Indeed, the Scriptures make it clear that as people of faith *we are his descendants*. And as such the pattern of God's working in Abraham's life is one that we ought not expect will be all that different from the pattern of his working in *our own* lives. God is no less committed to teaching us to trust him than he was with Abraham. And that means that we have every right to expect and hope that our own lives will evidence the same sorts of things that we have seen in Abraham's life - times of great faith and times of great faithlessness, to be sure - and yet, beyond these isolated and individual moments of faith and faithlessness, we can have confidence that God is growing us up too, that He IS teaching us to trust, that we ARE *learning to lean* on the promises of God.

Now, the challenge, sometimes, is *seeing this* and *believing this* and *remembering this*. Sometimes we can't see it, we have a hard time believing it, or we just plain forget. But on such matters as these, when it comes to seeing these things *in ourselves*, we are in the worst possible position to discern these realities. It's like with my kids growing up. I am always the last person to notice that my kids are getting any taller. It isn't until we go and see their grandparents or their cousins and somebody blurts out, "Wow, Emily's really gotten a lot taller" or something like that - and I look over at them and say, "Yeah, I suppose so", even though sometimes I still can't see it. Why? Because I'm with them every day, and the growth is so slow that it escapes detection for those that are in constant contact with it.

And so, the point is that on these matters that are so close to us and, indeed, ARE us, we are not in the best position to discern them. But that's why we need the church. It's not the ONLY reason we need the church, but it's an *important* one. Because as brothers and sisters in Christ we have the great privilege and responsibility of being each others' eyes and ears. We have the opportunity to help our brothers and sisters see things that they are having trouble seeing themselves, or reminding them of things they have forgotten, or believing things that they are currently struggling to believe, or of praying the prayers that they cannot, at the moment, find the words to pray.

As the Body of Christ, we have this great privilege and responsibility to encourage one another by reminding each other of the ways that we see God's purposes working out, by the ways we see each other learning to trust God, by the ways we see one another keeping on, keeping on, even in the midst of doubts and fears. The Gospel is, indeed, the most difficult thing for God's people to keep believing. And it takes an entire community to help us do it.

The second theme I want to comment briefly upon, which is perhaps a minor theme, although still significant, has to do with this whole matter of *making peace*. In the passage before us this morning we see Abraham responding graciously to a request for peace and even being willing to take steps to provide assurances of that peace - even if doing so came at a personal

cost.

Still further, we notice here that Abraham's willingness and desire to live peacefully with his neighbors did not stop him from speaking forthrightly about matters and taking on problems in a very direct fashion. He did not simply let the whole "incident with the well" go but brought it out into the open and stated his concern. And Abimelech, again to his credit, responded well and showed a great eagerness to address these issues in a satisfactory manner.

What's more, as we have already seen, Abraham was not raising the matter of the well to be difficult, or to disrupt the peace. Rather, he brought it up because it was a real concern and a real issue and there was nothing to be gained from pretending it wasn't there. It wasn't going to go away on its own. It had to be addressed. And so Abraham raises the issue.

But then, even as he raises the issues, he demonstrates, at the same time, a willingness to do whatever was necessary to resolve it in a peaceful fashion, including being willing, as we have seen, to take a hit, personally, by absorbing the cost of paying for a well that he himself had already dug, and then going on to do what was required to secure a covenant between himself and Abimelech regarding its *future* use.

What a great lesson are Abraham's actions for God's people in our own day. We too, like Abraham, ought to have a similar desire and willingness to pursue peace and to be peace-makers and peace-promoters wherever such things are biblically appropriate. As Paul writes in Romans,

Romans 12:14-21 *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.*¹⁵ *Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.*¹⁶ **Live in harmony with one another.** *Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.*¹⁷ *Never be conceited.*¹⁸ **Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.**¹⁹ **If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.**²⁰ *Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."*²¹ *To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."*²² *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

As God's people we are, as far as it depends on us, to strive to live peaceably even if doing so might mean, at times, that you absorb some of the cost of promoting that peace yourself - going the extra mile, being willing to sacrifice one thing for the greater good of the peace that will be achieved.

At the same time, we are not to allow the pursuit of peace to come at the expense of truth or honesty or forthrightness. We are not to allow the pursuit of peace to become a mask to cover our unwillingness to deal with hard things, or awkward things, or say things that need to be said.

Sometimes the most honorable thing, the most just thing, the *right thing* to do is to

DISTURB the peace, especially when it is the peace of sloth, or the peace of falsehood, or the peace of complicity, or the peace that comes upon churches as they slip into the benign coma of cultural Christianity.

Not all peace is good, but the peace that is honoring to God is a peace worth having, and one for which we ought to be willing to work, and even sacrifice, to achieve.

And, of course, the great model and the great motivation for us in all of this is our Heavenly Father who is himself the God of Peace. He is the one who had a legitimate dispute with all of humanity and who, even though he was the wronged party, as Abraham was, took it upon himself to do what was required to secure peace between himself and his enemies. Through the Cross of Christ, God mollified his own righteous anger and brought his people into a right relationship with himself. And in that action we who were once his enemies have become his friends.

Even more than friends, we have become his sons and daughters, adopted into his forever family, and made heirs to the riches of heaven. And as the ultimate peace-maker Himself, this same God has commissioned us into this ministry as his representatives, bringing the message of peace and reconciliation to those who will receive it. And, ultimately, that is the greatest and most lasting way to promote peace in this world - by showing people how to have peace with God through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The call upon us, therefore, is to respond to God's call in the Gospel to become the friends of God, to receive the gift of salvation and the restored fellowship with God that comes with that. Even further, the call of God upon us is to imitate the peace-making God by being peacemakers ourselves - to be quick to respond to peace when it is sought or offered, and to look for it and welcome it but, at the same time, to not do so at the expense of justice and truth. It is not peace for the sake of peace, it is not peace at all costs, it is rather a peace that comes from rightly ordering ourselves to the God of the universe and by rightly orienting ourselves and others toward that same God.

May God grant his blessing to *this* reading of His Word.....