

ISAAC'S COMFORT Genesis 24:62-69

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on July 12, 2020, the Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. The church was closed for the Coronavirus pandemic and the sermon was preached to an empty sanctuary for livestreaming.

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.

I.

Yesterday morning when I was working on this sermon, Barb Studenmund came to our door bearing a large, framed photo of Maggie presenting me with the stole during the service two weeks ago acknowledging the 40th anniversary of my ordination; and then in the afternoon Nancy Hall Berens came by with a large box full of cards you in the congregation sent for the occasion. I really appreciate the expression of gratitude on your part, which might even match the gratitude I feel in serving and leading you. You have touched my heart and mind and soul; and I appreciate it.

Most of the sermons I have been preaching this summer, even in the midst of pandemic and racial tension, have focused on characters found in the Book of Genesis. For the rest of the summer I plan to continue this pattern, always trusting the text itself – and the characters it presents – to speak to whatever is going on in the world and in our lives.

Today we look at Isaac: the long-awaited son of Abraham and Sarah, and as we shall see next week, the father of Jacob and Esau.

Prayer: Lord, your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. May this sermon contain enough of your word to be lamp and light for us today. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

When we join Isaac, he is a forty-year old single man who has been through significant trauma in his *not short* life.

- As a teenager, Isaac was nearly sacrificed by his father on the altar, only to be rescued at the last minute by the appearance of a ram in a nearby thicket, with both original command and provision of ram being presented to us the readers as occurring at the command of God.¹

¹ Genesis 22:1-19. See Sherwood Anderson, "Terror," in *Winesburg, Ohio* for a literary description of a boy (David Hardy) with an "Abraham" for an uncle (Jesse Bentley) and the terror the boy experiences at his grandfather's hands. (Penguin Books, pages 97-102).

- As preaching and teaching in this church has pointed out over the past several years, Isaac’s near sacrifice is followed almost immediately by the marital separation of his parents, each of whom take up residence in separate villages thirty miles from one another² and who are never again seen in scripture speaking to one another.
- When Isaac’s mother dies, Abraham arranges for her burial in a cave he purchases as the first and only element of “possession”³ of the Promised Land that he and Sarah receive,⁴ and there is no evidence that Isaac is *invited to* or *attends* the funeral.

Burdened by these family scars, Isaac is different from other patriarchs we see in Genesis:

- He does not journey in search of the Promised Land.
- He does not live in exile on or near the Land.
- He spends his life within the borders of his birth, cultivating its soil and becoming blessed,⁵ materially if not in terms of family.

With neither wife nor offspring – a distinct problem for one responsible for passing on God’s promise of land, descendants, and blessing – Isaac appears quiet, alone, reflective. Except for his near sacrifice, we as readers barely notice Isaac lodged between the powerful personalities of his father Abraham and his youngest son Jacob.

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Our passage for today comes as the concluding scene of the longest chapter in Genesis.⁶ Isaac is walking in the field in the evening, in solitude after a day of travel and work.

- In keeping with his quiet personality, Isaac walks every evening: talking to himself, talking to God, wondering and perhaps worrying if the promise of land, descendants, and blessing will stop with *his* own marriage-less, heir-less generation; or perhaps wondering if the promise has already been nullified by God’s command to his father Abraham, or by the possibility that Abraham has mis-heard God’s command.⁷
- People who grow up in families where there is violence, separation, intense conflict, disruption often have a difficult time imagining how God could use *their* family or *their* upbringing for divine purposes. They often wonder how they could be at all *worthy* in the *eyes* of God, better yet *worthy* in God’s *service*.

Prior to the point at which we join Isaac on his walk, an aging Abraham – who to his dying day never himself *blesses* Isaac – has nonetheless made significant arrangements to seek for Isaac a wife from among the Hebrew people. Abraham has directed a servant to “go to *my country* and to *my kindred* and get a wife

² Abraham returns to Beer-sheba (Genesis 22:19) and Sarah moves to Kiriath-arba (Hebron) Genesis 23:2.

³ Genesis 25:7-11.

⁴ Genesis 23:1-20.

⁵ Genesis 24:36 and 26:12.

⁶ *The HarperCollins Study Bible: Fully Revised and Updated New Revised Standard Version including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books with Concordance*, Harold W. Attridge, General Editor (New York: HarperCollins, Publisher), Genesis 24:1-67n.

⁷ The meaning of the Hebrew word for “walking” is uncertain; leading some to believe it is a leisurely stroll after a day of work. It could also be part of a regular prayer and meditation practice of Isaac’s. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Schoecken Books, 1995). 142.

for *my son* Isaac.”⁸ Through a lengthily narrated set of instructions,⁹ the charge appears to be on the verge of fulfillment through a wonderful human being named Rebekah, who supported by her family is given and exercises a rare degree of choice among woman of her day and *agrees* to be presented to Isaac as wife.

Looking up from his walk, Isaac sees camels coming in the distance. He notices the *camels* but not the *people* riding them. But soon he sees a woman slip quickly from a camel – almost as if she is falling.

She asks the servant, “Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us?”

The servant says, “It is my master.” That man is Isaac.

Rebekah veils and covers herself.¹⁰ The servant approaches Isaac and makes Isaac aware that everyone who has gathered around Isaac has put forth tremendous effort to bring Rebekah into his life.

- Isaac responds by accepting Rebekah as his wife.
- The narrator then tells us that Isaac *loves* Rebekah, and thus Isaac becomes the first person in the Bible to love another person.¹¹
- Isaac then takes Rebekah into the tent of his late mother Sarah.

Now it may have been the custom of the day for a groom to take a bride into the bedchamber of his mother. If so, many such entrances would doubtless be *pro forma*, as not every entrance into that place of intimacy and conception would be anything more than a nod to tradition and custom.

But for Isaac, taking Rebekah into *his mother’s tent* proves to be more than a nod toward tradition.

The narrator says: “*Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death.*”

Taking Rebekah into his mother’s tent represents for Isaac a *healing*, a retrieving from and connecting with all the things in his and his family’s past that have *hindered* his life as well as those things that have *given* him life. Isaac pieces together the *past* in a *place* of pain and beauty, so that *healing* comes in the *present*, and *joy* comes in the *morning*.

“*Isaac was comforted after this mother’s death.*”

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The liberating power of such comfort bears itself out through the remainder of Isaac’s life.

⁸ Genesis 24:4.

⁹ Genesis 24:1-61.

¹⁰ *HarperCollins* note at 24:62-67 comments: “She veils herself, an enticing form of concealment, as a marriageable woman before a marriageable man.” *NISB* comments that “veiling is not mentioned as a customary practice for married women in Genesis. Rebekah’s veil, used only when she meets her future husband, may be part of the marriage ceremony itself.” (*New Interpreter’s Study Bible New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 24:67n.

¹¹ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* (New York: Schocken Books, 2009), 237.

- When Abraham dies, Isaac *joins* his formerly estranged half-brother Ishmael in *burying* their father next to Isaac's mother.¹²
- Isaac's love for Rebekah leads him to be *monogamous*, the only patriarch so to be.
- Isaac focuses his lengthy *prayers* on Rebekah, and after another twenty years of childless-ness, Rebekah gives birth to twins, Jacob and Esau,¹³ following a difficult pregnancy.¹⁴

While not everyone's story ends with such happiness, including as we shall see next week Rebekah's, the *love* Isaac experiences for Rebekah and the *comfort* he receives in his mother's tent upon their marriage leads him to come into his own, materially, spiritually, matrimonially.

“Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.”

II.

About this time last year, I returned to you from several Sundays away in which I had been dealing with the sudden illness, death, and burial of my own mother. I shared with you that in the week between her death and funeral, living in her house alone, I went through items she had saved in a cedar chest at the foot of her bed. I shared with you that going through the rather small collection of photographs, high school annuals, and the few newspaper clippings she had saved over the nearly fifty years since I had lived in her home, I learned more about her, got a fuller picture of the reserved and sometimes brooding woman who gave me birth, and the pain she had known in the death of her older brother when she and he were teenagers, in a stillborn delivery prior to my birth, in the death of her husband my father in her early forties, in the brevity of a rather hasty, short-lived marriage a few years later, and in the solitude of living alone with a life filled with the richness of friends and faith for over forty years until her death, including a deep and beautiful love she experienced in the last six months of her life.

At that time, I had not yet done the deep research on this particular passage when I wrote that most personal sermon, but a few weeks after the sermon, when I studied this passage in preparation for the Moveable Feast preaching group, to see Isaac comforted after his mother's death when he brought Rebekah into her bedchamber jumped out at me in the comfort I experienced piecing together the strands of her life sifting through the cedar chest at the foot of her bed the week after she died. Like Isaac, I was comforted after my mother's death.

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At this season in our nation, many are aware in a heightened way of places of pain and beauty: battlefields, national parks, monuments, books, team names and mascots, flags national and state, symbols and slogans that give hope for some, offense for others, and confusion for many, and versions of history, narratives and legends that have shaped our national culture for good or for ill, for clarity, confusion, or cover-up. Many of us are aware of *places of healing*. Many of us are aware of *places of pain*. For some, healing and pain are found in the *same* places. Sometimes, healing comes through re-visiting places of pain; Normandy and Buchenwald and Saigon. Sometimes, healing comes through setting such places aside and visiting them no more.

¹² Genesis 25:9.

¹³ Genesis 25:26.

¹⁴ Genesis 26:19-28.

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Many of you know that for fifteen years I have served on the Board of the Faith and Politics Institute in D.C. This service has led me to travel several times in congressional pilgrimages, led by Representative John Lewis, to places of beauty and pain that marked the Civil Rights Movement in our country. I have been to the Sixteenth Street Church in Birmingham, the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery. I've been to the Claiborne Temple and the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. I have been to the site of Bryant's Grocery in Money, Mississippi, where Emmett Till was abducted, and to the courthouse in Sumner where his killers were acquitted. I have stood at Fannie Lou Hamer's grave and worshipped in the Mother Emanuel Church. I have seen in those places of pain people who fought the battles at the time – and who are still living; people who pilgrimage nearly every year and always find it healing; and people who have never visited such places before, and filled with a sense of tragedy and sadness, wonder and hope. Of all the sites I have seen and visited, the most moving occurred in 2014, when Maggie was able to join me, and along with about 75 others people, we were in the home, carport, driveway where Medgar Evers was slain in 1963. The family donated the home to Tougaloo College, which has kept it intact and furnished just as it was the night he was slain. As part of our visit, a reunion took place between Representative Lewis and Myrlie Evers-Williams, who after the death of her husband moved to Los Angeles and became a significant community leader. Speaking to the crowd, on the carport, a few feet from where Evers was slain, the two reminisced, laughed, embraced, cried, and led us in singing. That carport, that driveway, that home was a place of beauty and pain, comfort and healing.

“Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death.”

III.

In the Christian faith, it is the Table, the Table of the Lord, the, the Communion Table, the Altar – with its attendant Bread and Wine – that is a place of comfort borne out of a place of pain.

“The *Last Supper*.”

“*One* of you will be *betray* me.”

“This is my *body broken* for you.”

“This is my *blood, shed* for you.”

A place of arrest, denial, abandonment;

Cock crowing and swords drawn and a kiss of death.

A place of *beauty*, a place of *pain*.

George Herbert wrote:

*Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,
Which my God feels as blood; but I, as wine.*¹⁵

Wherever you are take this bread and wine, body and blood, in that place of beauty and pain known as the Lord's Table, and find in that partaking, at that Table, healing and comfort.

“Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death.”

¹⁵ George Herbert, “The Agony,” available at <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-agony/#:~:text=To%20hunt%20his%20cruel%20food%20through%20ev'ry%20vein.&text=If%20ever%20he%20did%20taste,%3B%20but%20I%2C%20as%20wine.>