

July 13, 2014
Fifth Sunday After Pentecost - Bob Munshaw

Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 119:105-112; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Years ago, when I was young and foolish, I participated in two activities that have contributed to my hearing being abysmal in my left ear. In college, I spent summers working in a meat packing plant where we were encouraged, but not required, to wear hearing protection. I also loved, and still love, listening to music. The wise motto that I subscribed to at the time was: "If it is too loud, then you are too old." Anyway, I still hear fine out of my right ear, but if you happen to be on my left side, and decide that you want to talk to me, you'd better speak up.

Of course, this has led to problems at home sometimes focused around interpretations about whether I can't hear when Jen asks me to do something, or whether I am just not listening. I try to assure her that it is a hearing issue, but she is not always so sure.

There is a difference between hearing and listening, of course. Hearing is an incredibly complex process whereby sound waves are carried by hair and bones into the inner ear and then converted to signals that the brain interprets as sound. Hearing, like sight, is at least to me an incredible testament of God's intricate and intimate creation.

But that is hearing ... in listening, we are taking an active role in the process. We are attending to something or someone. I can sit and watch a Cardinals game, better yet a hockey game at home, and Jen can be sitting right beside me, making those little inner ear hairs vibrate, and I can nod my head and say "uh huh ... uh huh" but though I hear her words, I could not tell you what she has said. Unless I mute, or turn off the game and attend to her, I will not really be listening to her.

... and Jesus says, let anyone with ears, listen.

Just so you know, we often reflect on all four Scripture texts, but today, at Pastor Judy's request, I am going to focus largely on our Old Testament reading, and allow you the joy of reflecting on the other three texts on your own.

In our Genesis passage we have this strange family. We have been wonderfully introduced to them over the last couple weeks. Through John, we have especially heard about Isaac, who is at the very least ... a strange character. Last week, we also learned about the town well, and its use as a place of courtship in the ancient world. Isaac's story reminds us that God uses whom He will. It gives hope to all of us. There are very few of us who are perfect, and a lot of us who carry various aspects of brokenness, physically, mentally and spiritually. This, we need to listen to: God loves us in the midst of our brokenness. Sometimes God uses us because of our brokenness and failures.

The story of the Patriarchs does not end with Isaac, of course. Today the Old Testament text introduces us to Isaac's two sons. To give us a little context ... chapter 25 begins with an ending. Abraham moves on after the death of Sarah. He remarries and has other children, and at 175 years old, as he prepares to pack it in, he sends away his other children (with gifts), and then leaves the rest of his sizable inheritance to Isaac.

The text then traces the descendants of Ishmael. Ishmael joins Isaac to bury their father Abraham, but then Ishmael moves on. The text tells us that Ishmael also had 12 sons who became 12 tribes, and they settled east of Egypt, which would be southeast of Israel. Unlike the brief attention that Isaac receives, Jacob wends his way around the entirety of the rest of the book of Genesis. In fact, when his descendants leave Egypt 400 years later at the time of the Exodus, they carry his dried-up bones with them. This is Jacob. This is Israel.

For Christians, his story is our story, too ... and it, too, is often a strange one. Oh, of course many, maybe most of us, have heard these stories before. We have seen them on flannel-graph boards, and watched interpretations of them on Veggie Tales, but let anyone with ears, listen/reflect/consider.

We have this strange family, and according to the text, beginning with Abraham, God has chosen this family as his plan for the redemption of the world ... and if we project the story far enough, we ultimately come to Jesus, whom Matthew takes great pains to show belongs to this family. The promise given to Abraham in Genesis 12 is that all nations will be blessed through him. This is hugely important ... and we need to hear it today! God has raised up this family. He has raised up a people who become an entire nation so that all peoples, all nations will be blessed.

This promise/covenant is also given to Isaac. We read of it in chapter 26. It is reaffirmed to Jacob in Genesis 28. You're no doubt familiar with the story of Jacob's ladder ... listen again to a portion beginning in verse 10

*Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. **11** When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. **12** He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. **13** There above it stood the Lord, and he said: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. **14** Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring **15** I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."*

Then again in chapter 35, God meets with Jacob again at Bethel and reaffirms this promise with very similar words.

Again, this strange family is God's plan ... and the promise given to Abraham in Genesis 12 and reaffirmed to Jacob in chapter 28 is that all peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.

Every once in a while, the extended Munshaw clan gets together for some sort of reunion. The last gathering was in May of 2013 when my grandma died, just short of her 104th birthday. I have to admit that there are some strange/odd people in the greater Munshaw family. Uncle Vic is gone now, but among other things, I remember him hiding around the corner when the Jehovah's Witnesses came to the house and calling out things like "You are white-washed sepulchers," and "You are leading the righteous astray," while my poor aunt tried to talk to them at the front door. Then there was Uncle Dave ... and without betraying just how odd Uncle Dave is, let me just say that when we told my brother that we had named our youngest son David, his first remark was, "Oh no, not another David Munshaw." My uncles got their oddness honestly, though. Grandpa Munshaw used to try and get us to taste his chewing tobacco when we were 5 or 6. There is certainly some strangeness in the Munshaw family ... just as I suppose there is in many of your families. And yet, in spite of the Munshaw oddness, many in that family are strong Christians, and many have ended up either in full-time Christian ministry, or serving God as faithful lay people in their churches.

And in our Genesis text, we have this strange family ... and they are the ones that God has elected. We almost have caricatures in our heads of all of them. You have Isaac, the father, who comes across at the very least as strange. You have Rebekah. She may or may not have been overly happy to be married to Isaac, but both parents certainly played favorites. Every parent knows that this is a bad idea that leads to messed-up kids.

Jacob's name means something like "heel-grabber" and might also mean "deceiver;" when we hear his whole story, the name seems fitting. Esau comes across sometimes as at least impulsive. But, what I like about the entirety of the story is that this is a real family. They are not even close to perfect. They are odd to us. They make bad mistakes, and yet, God still works with them. I think that as we see this of God, it gives us hope for ourselves and for our own families. God can work in and through us, too ... as odd or as fragile as we are.

But this is the family that God covenants with. Bruce Shelley writes that "*in modern times we define a host of relations by contracts. These are usually for goods or services and for hard cash. The contract, formal or informal, helps to specify failure in these relationships. The Lord did not establish a contract with Israel or with the church. He created a covenant. There is a difference. Contracts are broken when one of the parties fails to keep his promise. If, let us say, a patient fails to keep an appointment with a doctor, the doctor is not obligated to call the house and inquire, 'Where were you? Why didn't you show up for your appointment?' He simply goes on to his next patient and has his appointment secretary take note of the patient who failed to keep the appointment. The patient may find it harder the next time to see the doctor. He broke an informal contract. According to the Bible, however, the Lord asks: 'Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget,*

I will not forget you!' (Isaiah 49:15) The Bible indicates the covenant is more like the ties of a parent to her child than it is a doctor's appointment. If a child fails to show up for dinner, the parent's obligation, unlike the doctor's, isn't canceled. The parent finds out where the child is and makes sure he's cared for. One member's failure does not destroy the relationship. A covenant puts no conditions on faithfulness. It is the unconditional."

We read that Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, and just like Abraham and Sarah, there is a problem with barrenness. Isaac and Rebekah wait twenty years to have a child. We don't know what kind of conversations Abraham and Isaac have had over the years, but Isaac must have understood something of his place in terms of the covenant made with Abraham. He must have understood that if God were going to keep His covenant, he and Rebekah were going to need to have children. So, we read that he began to pray. An interesting tidbit that John Massena pointed out to me is that this is the only time where we read that it is the father praying that God would give a child. In other Old Testament texts on barrenness, it is always the mother who is praying for a child.

We read in the text that YHWH granted Isaac his request. It's interesting to consider what would have happened if Isaac would not have prayed. Theologically, is God sometimes waiting for us to ask for His help? How would God have kept the covenant promise that he made to Abraham if Isaac and Rebekah had no child? Was God testing Isaac's faith? Was the talk of God answering Isaac's prayer merely the theological speculation of the author? I don't know the answer, but at the age of 60, the seed takes, and Rebekah finds herself with restless twins jostling around in her womb. Twins!! All Isaac and Rebekah need is one healthy baby through whom the covenant could be fulfilled and they get two boys.

The text tells us that the boys are struggling with each other in her womb ... and Rebekah finally goes to God. There is room for interpretation in what she prays. The NIV and the NLT have her griping, "Why is this happening to me?" But the NRSV is probably closer to the original Hebrew, and has her asking, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" Like many of these very imperfect Old Testament characters, she takes it to God. ... Again, those of us with ears should listen to this—do we take things to God in good and bad times?

Why do we talk about these stories? How do they become our stories? Stories have the power to shape us ... especially if we claim them as our stories. Why does any of it matter, unless we believe in a God who shows up? A God who interacts ... and in this narrative we find that God interacts. He answers Isaac's prayer for a child. Rebekah somehow senses that the children are struggling in her womb. What does she do? She goes to God and asks why. God not only answers her, but gives her a prophetic word that the older of the twins will serve the younger.

We find that God acts and interacts. We find that God has a plan, but the characters in the story are also free to follow God and his plan in the story ... and perhaps that leads to messes sometimes. Jacob and Esau are portrayed very differently in the story. While Jacob hangs out at home, Esau is an outdoorsman, a mighty hunter. Isaac and Rebekah

make a classic parental mistake. Isaac favors Esau, who is a man's man. Rebekah, maybe because of the prophetic oracle she has received from God, favors Jacob ...

Well, the twins grow up in this environment, and at some point, Esau came home from a hunt famished. In the Ancient Near Eastern culture, the firstborn son received a double portion of the family's inheritance. We know that Isaac had inherited everything from Abraham, and that Abraham had been a very wealthy man. So, Esau's inheritance was a big deal.

As we briefly transition to the gospel (and I do mean briefly), perhaps a good way to think about this story is that this is indeed God's world. God has a plan of redemption for this world, and we are invited to partner with God in this plan. Again, the plan of redemption has been spelled out by God ... This family, God's people, are to be a blessing to this world. Our foibles, errors, etc., may lead to God altering his plans to carry out his purposes, but our brokenness or disobedience or neglect will not ultimately and finally frustrate God's plan of redemption. God just may use different means.

Jesus' parable of the sower can be seen as an invitation to partner with God's plan of reconciliation in the world. Obviously some will be more receptive than others to the message of God's love, but I think that our invitation in the parable is in many ways the same as the call and covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob so long ago. Let God bless those around us through what he is doing in our lives. May we each have ears to hear.