

Faith Mennonite Church
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Seek Peace and Pursue It
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Trusting in Abundance Keeps the Peace

Psalm 34:1-3, 8-14; Genesis 26:12-33

Cultural and ideological differences no doubt come into play in many of the hotspots of conflict around the globe. But more often than not, wars are being fought over resources—land, minerals and, increasingly, water. The World Health Organization and UNICEF estimate that 783 million people (11% of world population) lack access to safe water.¹ Insufficient water and sanitation have life-and-death consequences in the developing world, but even here in the US, particularly in arid portions of the southwest, water is a high-stakes resource.

Our story this morning about Isaac and the wells, though very old and set in a very different time from our own, resonates with our modern conflict over resources. It is a story that speaks to us at a personal as well as a social level.

Let's begin with a bit of context to situate this story. Isaac was the son of Abraham and Sarah, born in their old age when having children didn't seem like a possibility. Abraham had been called by God to leave his family and homeland and follow God and begin a story of blessing. Most of us are familiar with the story of Isaac's early life and the conflict into which he was born when his parents tried their hand at fulfilling God's promise of children. Jealousy and envy raged between Isaac's mother Sarah and Hagar, the mother of Abraham's first son Ishmael. We've heard the story of Isaac's near sacrifice. We also know the story of Isaac's old-age: how his son Jacob acted cunningly to steal both the birthright and the blessing that Isaac intended to bestow on his first-born son Esau.

In these stories from early and old age, Isaac is portrayed as a vulnerable victim, first because of his young age and later because of vision loss in his old age. He doesn't have much agency in the conflicts that swirl around him and his dysfunctional family.

Chapter 26 of Genesis provides a different picture and it is the *only* glimpse we get of the mid-section of Isaac's life. In our story today, when Isaac was in his prime, he is portrayed as a man of power. Although Isaac had other siblings, in addition to his half-brother Ishmael, he would have been the sole inheritor of his father Abraham's considerable wealth. In addition, he enjoyed bountiful harvests and his livestock multiplied. Like his father Abraham, he too was a sojourner, living in the land of others. Those others, the Philistines, saw his presence as a threat. They had previously stopped up the wells that his father had dug, probably hoping that this would deter the family from returning to the area. When he arrived, however, and they saw the power behind his wealth, the leader of the Philistines, Abimelech, asked him to leave.

So he did. He moved away, but not too far. His servants re-dug a well of Abraham and found water. Seeing this, the Philistine herders decided to claim their rights to the water. Isaac no doubt had enough power and resources that he could have defended the well and pushed the Philistines back, but instead he turned and moved on to another location. A second time his men dug a previously-filled well and found water, and a second time the Philistines came to claim the well. Again, Isaac turns from the argument and moves his family and livestock.

Finally they dug a third well and this time, the Philistines didn't pursue them. In fact, Abimelech sends an envoy to negotiate a peace accord. Isaac generously hosts them with a feast and offers them lodging for the night. In the morning they sign an accord and Abimelech leaves. Soon after, Isaac learns that his men have opened yet another well.

Each of the wells in the stories received a name. Isaac named the first two *Contention* and *Enmity* since they were the wells that the Philistines quarreled for. The latter two were named *Broad places* and *Oath*, signifying the providence and peace that emerged.

This story high-lights at least two factors that contribute to peace: First, Isaac trusted in God's *abundance*. He didn't try to hold on to the first well that gave water, fearing that it might be the only chance for water. He trusted that he could move on and seek another solution. How often do conflicts grow and spiral out of control because people get trapped in stories of scarcity. They hold tightly to what they have because they

¹ http://www.wateraidamerica.org/what_we_do/statistics.aspx?gclid=CKC49-r-qrACFQoDQAodWDd0Sg

imagine it's *all* that they'll ever have. They can't conceive of it expanding to meet the needs of others. It's a zero-sum game.

Most of us grow up with a family ethos of abundance or scarcity, and we often act out of one of those instincts even if it doesn't match our current resource situation. (I grew up the child of parents who were formed by the depression; our family ethos was largely one of scarcity, although my parents shared generously of their garden produce. Yet when I lived in Central America, first as a student and later with Mennonite Central Committee, I experience people who had far less than my family of origin, yet surprised me time and again with their generosity because they experienced abundance through the practice of reciprocity. You gave as a guarantee that someone would give back in your time of need.

As you think of conflict situations that you have encountered, has scarcity been a contributing factor? Trusting in God's abundance can open up amazing options that aren't available if we focus narrowly on the limitations that face us.

The second factor that contributed to peace in this story was Isaac's willingness to back down--to walk away. It's rather surprising, given that Isaac was the one with the greatest power. He could have easily held his ground and insisted on his own way. But how might that have turned out? People might have gotten killed—both Philistines and Isaac's company. Low-scale warfare might have ensued: the Philistines might have tried to fill up the wells or cause other aggravations like stealing livestock or setting fires to the crops. The powerful often expect those who are less powerful to back down, but when people are in need of a resource, whether it's food, water, land or an energy source, they will struggle persistently in conflicts that get passed from one generation to the next. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a prime example.

Backing down caused Isaac a bit of inconvenience—he and his company had to make a couple moves. But in the big picture it was a masterful move. Without bloodshed and without destruction of property both sides achieved a peaceful settlement: Isaac was able to remain in the land and the Philistines ended up with 2 additional wells. There was water and grazing space for all.

Backing down isn't an easy thing to do; it goes against our basic instinct to protect and hold on to the things we consider to be rightfully ours. But if defending actually threatens the very good we are trying to protect, or if defending destroys something belonging to the other, we must seek another way. That other way, the way of relinquishing power, is the way of Jesus.

Of course, the power that Jesus wielded was very different than the power of Isaac. Isaac was powerful in material resources. Jesus, on the other hand, had no material resources. His power came in relationships, in his deep communion with God, and in the wisdom of God. His lack of material resources actually strengthened his position because there was nothing that others could take from him. Even his life was something he ultimately gave.

Feminists and persons who are members of historically marginalized and oppressed groups caution that we not naively make a blanket case for backing down, without evaluating the power balance or imbalance that is at play. Those voices and experiences warrant careful listening and attention. One of the gifts of community, of being part of the community of Jesus, is that we share resources and join forces so that those who do have power might take risks and relinquish power on behalf of others. We do this not condescendingly or paternalistically but in partnership that develops in bonds forged through struggle, pain, and joy.

As we proceed with our summer worship series, it is our plan to invite a couple people each Sunday to reflect on the biblical story from their personal experience. We will not do that this morning since we are observing communion, but I hope we will continue in conversation with one another, during fellowship time or at mealtime at home, about the meaning of this story (and the others we will hear this summer) for our lives today.

I invite you now into a few moments of silence. How has trusting in God's abundance helped you resolve conflict? Have you ever found peace in walking away when someone threatened you? What do we hear God speaking to us today?