

Sermon – July 12, 2020
“Despised Birthright”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these word. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Amen

Good morning. Welcome to in-person and live stream worship! It is a blessing to be able to be back in the sanctuary this morning! For those attending on the live stream, we have not forgotten you or that many cannot yet return. We worship here under restrictions and precautions, and we ask that you consider the impact of exposure no matter how limited the risk may be before you return to worship. Jesus promises to be present with us even if we live stream. So, carefully consider your situation before you return.

Here at Afton it is our first Sunday back, and I want to remind us that we need to be masked, to wash our hands, maintain social distancing, pray for each other, read the scriptures and encourage each other. We will learn together how to worship in this new time, but while keeping our new practices, please remember the foundation that brings us closer to Christ.

We are continuing our journey through the Old Testament. And there is only one event that we need to be aware of in our journey. Somewhere during today’s stop, which covers a span of many years, Abraham dies. He lives to be 175 and is buried by his sons Isaac and Ishmael. He may be around to witness the birth of the twins and to see the covenant promise continue. He may in fact be the one through whom Rebekah inquires of the LORD. The specifics are not clear from scripture, but his death is a significant event in our adopted family’s story. Our family history, our story, moves from Abraham and Sarah to Isaac and Rebecca and their children as our story as God’s people moves forward.

We should notice that barrenness is again an issue in the story of God’s people. Like Sarah, Rebekah is a wife who is not able to conceive. God’s hand will be needed to be seen strong in her life for God’s people to grow and continue the covenant promise. Sarah was barren for twenty-five years, Rebekah for twenty. We should take note when we find a barren woman in the scriptures, for when this occurs and God intercedes, a holy person is born. Examples include

Rachel who gives birth to Joseph, Hannah who gives birth to Samuel, and Manoah's wife who gives birth to Sampson. The children born in these circumstances in our story are key people who turn God's people to God. They are also precursors for God's interaction with Mary to bring forth Jesus our LORD, where God's interaction brings forth not just a holy person but the very son of God.

With Rebekah's situation, we see Isaac pray for his wife. He prays even with God's covenant promise being in place. Isaac's prayer is honored by God and Rebekah conceives. We need to take note of our ancestor's willingness to pray and ask God to fulfill His promises in their lives. We do not know how long Isaac prays for Rebekah to conceive, just that she is barren for twenty years. Our prayers, like Isaac's, need to be unceasing until God responds. Isaac knows that God has promised to make a great nation through his wife Rebekah, and he waits for God to act while he prays to God to act. God wants us to pray, to come before him with our supplications. We see this modeled in the life of Jesus, a man of prayer, who often goes aside to pray alone, spending time with the Father in prayer. He is one with a zeal for the house of God to be a house of prayer. We as sons and daughters of God, friends of Jesus, should not hesitate to ask God in prayer in the name of Jesus Christ and in the power and intercession of the Holy Spirit for what is upon our hearts. We also should strive to be a people of prayer.

At some point following Isaac's prayer, Rebekah conceives. While Rebekah conceives, this is no normal pregnancy. There is turmoil in her womb, enough that she inquires of the LORD and receives a prophecy through which she learns there are twins in her womb who will be two nations, and even at this stage of development these nations are in conflict. She also learns that the older child will serve the younger, an inversion of what is expected for the patriarchal families of this time. This is another recurring theme we will see in our Old Testament journey. Examples have not yet been part of our journey, but if we have been reading through Genesis, then already we have seen this struggle of the older and younger in the accounts of Cain and Abel and Ishmael and Isaac. God does not choose based on the conventions of the culture, but on what is found in the heart. Rebekah takes this prophecy to heart and is comforted by the news. In the fullness of time, she gives birth to twin boys. The first born is hairy and is red or ruddy in coloring. The only other place this description of ruddy is used for a person in the Bible is to describe David later in Israel's story when God selects David as Israel's king. Esau is named as a description of his appearance; his name means red. Jacob is named for

his actions. Jacob is born holding onto Esau's heel. He appears at birth to be trying to pull Esau back and take his place. Even from birth the conflict between these two sons is apparent.

Years go by and the twins grow to be men. The covenant promise can only be continued through one of these sons and he must be the one chosen by God to become the next patriarch. Who will be next in the line of Abraham and Isaac: Esau or Jacob? The patriarchal concept is for the oldest son to be the one to receive the material goods, the responsibility of the family leadership, and God's covenant promise. The prophecy Rebekah received when she inquired of the LORD foretold that the younger will be stronger and the older will serve the younger. Two nations are present and God will choose one. Sometime in their growing into young men, Abraham dies. Isaac inherits all that Abraham had, including the covenant promise from God. As the two sons grow, so does their conflict. The two are not unified to cooperate with God, seeking to build each other up and strengthen one another for the roles they will have in God's covenant promise. Instead they are both seeking to live life as they choose. Esau becomes a hunter, one who lives in the field. In the Jewish culture that develops as the nation emerges in the covenant promise, a hunter is seen as an uncouth person. Jacob is a man of the tents, a person of order, having administrative skills, diligence in executing tasks, and he is a keeper of herds. The men may be twins, but they are two different people with two very different sets of character traits. To make this situation more difficult, Isaac loves Esau. This is not to say that he does not love Jacob, but that he favors Esau because he likes to eat wild game. Rebekah loves Jacob. This is not to say that she does not love Esau, but she favors Jacob. This part of our story is not about the parents and their parenting skills but about the hearts of the twins. We will also see this theme of favoritism in other places in our Old Testament journey. And we should notice that it is through the inclinations of the mother's heart that God's intentions are reflected.

We need to be clear what the concept of a birthright is that is being discussed in this transaction between Esau and Jacob. The birthright entitled the first born to a double portion of all of the material goods of the family. It also was the son who would become the new leader of the clan, the decision maker. There is a second part to the birthright called the blessing. It is the time when the birthright is put in place, a time when the heir is formally acknowledged and a time when a new leader enters the family structure. Jacob will need both the birthright from Esau and the blessing from Isaac to achieve his goal of being in charge of the family. Jacob desires the birthright and the leadership of the clan, and he may aspire to God's covenant

promise as well. His chance for the birthright comes one day when Esau comes into camp and has not had success in hunting, and in a very impulsive moment Esau asks not to eat some of the stew that Jacob is making, but to gulp it down. Jacob instantly realizes that the moment he has waited for has arrived. He is ready to take advantage of his brother's impulsive desire and offers his starving brother stew in exchange for his birthright. Esau sells the birthright for a single meal. His willingness to part with the birthright for such a trivial amount shows how little he cares for the birthright and what it means. Jacob is quick to secure not just a promise from his brother but also an oath, so there will be no argument or conflict over what happened in this business transaction. Esau despised his birthright and sells it for a meal of stew. He says it is of little value to one who is going to die of starvation. Notice that in exchange for the birthright Jacob gives stew and bread, more than the agreed upon amount for the birthright. His action of giving more marks the birthright as something of value to him. While Esau despises the birthright of material and leadership for the clan, this aspect of his character also points to his despising the covenant promise from God, and as such he is not chosen by God to be the one through whom the covenant promise will continue. But the path forward for a selection to bear the covenant promise is not complete. Jacob also has tried to force his way into God's plan instead of allowing God to work out the details of the younger leading the older. Jacob will need to be refined and changed before God can trust the covenant promise of a great nation to bless all the nations of the world to him. Since both of the sons have character issues, the covenant promise is again in jeopardy. God's plan is at risk for being fulfilled through Abraham's children. Change will be needed in the hearts of one of these men in order for God's promise to be realized. The story of God's people is at an impasse, and God will need to refine a son so that he will be acceptable as the choice for the covenant bearer. We do not see this moment of jeopardy with God's son, Jesus, who does not seek to arrive at God's plan through his own efforts or action, but fully surrenders to God's will and goes to the cross and dies that we might be reconciled to God. God will give to His first born all power and authority as his inheritance. To him every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.

In the New Testament, Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son and has the younger son return and humble himself before his father and receive the father's love while the older son, the son with the birthright, will not even go in and celebrate the recovery of the lost younger son. Jesus shows the ability of the younger son to humble himself, cooperate with God, return to his

father, receive forgiveness, and be loved by the father. The older son will not even consider fulfilling the role of the birthright and welcoming his younger brother back to the family even when that son seeks only to be a slave in his father's house. In Jesus' story, grace is at the center of living into the covenant promise as seen in the Father's love for his lost son and the welcome he is given upon his return to the father. We also are sons and daughters of God to whom grace is extended and to whom the refinement of sanctification is available, allowing us to grow into children of God who can be used to bring about the kingdom of God, a blessing to all of the nations.

What have we learned from our stop today on our journey through the Old Testament? First, we have seen Isaac pray for his wife. Isaac intercedes on behalf of Rebekah and God honors that prayer. His willingness to take his needs to God in prayer should remind us of Jesus praying in the Garden, taking the needs of humanity to his Father, and God honoring his prayer. We also, as children of God, should be those who are known for the prayers we lift up to God for the needs of our brothers and sisters, for our community, and for all of the nations of the world. We should be known as those who are crying out to God for the lost and are seeking the Holy Spirit to guide us into interactions that will allow us to share the Good News of Jesus Christ in Jesus' mission.

In our story this morning, we have seen God work through imperfect people to refine them and to help them grow into the type of people whose hearts are open to God. Jacob's journey to become the son of Isaac who can become part of the covenant promise is just beginning. We also have hearts that are yet to be refined or sanctified completely before God. We each have aspects of life that we struggle with, and too often we also seek to help God's plan along instead of waiting for God to act in His time and His power. We, like Jacob, need to seek God and be open to allowing the Holy Spirit to change us, to refine us into people that can be used to be about kingdom work.

Finally, we have the opportunity to ask ourselves, "Are we those who despise our birthright?" Not the material inheritance that we have been given through our ancestors, but the birthright we were given when we were born again as followers of Christ. Are we like Esau and care little for what has been given to us through Jesus' action on the cross, or are we like Jacob, one who will seek to cooperate with God and allow God to refine us to remake us like Jesus? One path is wide and easy and leads to destruction, and the other is narrow and difficult, but

leads to a life fully surrendered to Christ and eternal life reconciled to God. Will we be those who despise our birthright or those who seek with all we are before Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit to live out our new birthright, right here, right now?

Pray with me: Father, open us to a new conviction to pray, teach us to pray, and empower us through the guidance of the Holy Spirit to pray. Father, we confess that we still need to be refined into those who fully embrace our new birthright. Guide us, change us, fill us anew with the Holy Spirit, and refine us that we may be among those who are growing into the image of Christ and are engaging in Jesus' mission, right here, right now. Amen