

Isaac – Genesis 26:17-25, Ephesians 2:14-22

When we started this sermon series on the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew chapter 1, I was expecting we'd discover how these people who are part of Jesus' living memory shape his identity and purpose and therefore shape – we who belong to Christ – who are members of God's household (as we heard this morning) – our identity and purpose. And I expect that we will! But I didn't expect I would discover that Julie-ann Hingley and I are cousins!

We worked out, after last Sunday, that my great great great grandparents Edward Tunbridge and Maria Baker are also Julie-ann's great great grandparents. So, Julie-ann says (and I will take her word for this because this always confuses me) we are third cousins once removed! As she also said, *"Amazing what you find out when you preach/hear a sermon on genealogy!"*

The information we have about our shared grandparents is pretty patchy. Edward was apparently in the British Navy and deserted his ship in Sydney in 1857 intending to travel to the Bathurst gold fields. But he got on the wrong boat and instead of travelling up the Paramatta River, ended up on the Lane Cove River. He stayed and, seven years later, married Maria Baker (daughter of William Baker and the convict Jane Wood) and they lived on the river flats growing fruit and vegetables and selling timber and sand. Maria taught the children to read and write, using the Bible as her text, and on one occasion, when the two oldest boys, Thomas and Harry (Julie-ann's ancestor), had been punished by his father, the story goes that Harry ran into the bush very angry, and his older brother came after him and quoted to him, *"Honour thy father and mother..."* If you go to Lane Cove National Park, to Commandment Rock Picnic Ground, you can find traces of their carving of that Bible verse on the rocks beside the river.

The stories about Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah, who we are focusing on today are also pretty patchy and, mainly, focus on other people; the joy and laughter surrounding his birth (which gives him his name 'he laughs'), the strange command to Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son, the finding of a wife for him, Rebekah, by Abraham's servant, and the trick Rebekah plays on him in his old age so Jacob, her favourite, receive the first born's blessing.

In all these stories Isaac seems to sit quietly in the background.

Except in our reading today where he is the main actor, settling in Gerar, in Genesis 26:1, alongside the Philistines and their king, Abimelech, and prospering in Gerar to the point where the Philistines get jealous (verse 14) and tell him to leave. And what does Isaac do? He leaves.

And then, in the verses we read, we hear the story of Isaac's alternative response to conflict. How, faced by the malice of the Philistines who had filled in the wells dug in the days of his father Abraham, Isaac re-digs the wells. Then when the herders from Gerar quarrel with his herders, again, he does not fight them but moves on - naming the wells *Esek* (Contention) and *Sitnah* (Enmity). He

continues to dig wells and names the third well *Rehoboth* (Broad places or Room), saying, *"Now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land."*

Wells, in the ancient world and the Old and New Testaments are extremely significant places – representing in real terms life, life and health, and social connection. It is no coincidence that three Old Testament patriarchs meet their future wives (or their father's servant meets in Isaac's case) beside wells, and wells can also – as it our story today – be the setting for conflict and for the possibilities of different ways of responding to conflict.

And it is at this point that God appears again to Isaac, renewing the covenant with him – God's blessing for his family and beyond; (verse five) *"all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves through your offspring"*. And as if to signify this moment – its promise of life and ongoing social connection – again we are told Isaac's servants dig a well. This is what Isaac and his servants do well – they dig wells!

If we read on in the text, something remarkable then happens. Abimelech comes to Isaac, with his advisor Ahuzzath and his army commander Phicol - a kind of interagency delegation. *"Why have you come to me seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?"* asks Isaac, calling a spade a spade (which is what comes from knowing how to dig wells), and they explain that they have seen that God is with him and want to make a covenant with him. Isaac throws them a feast, and they eat and drink together, and in the morning they exchange oaths and depart in peace. And – at this moment – Isaac's servants burst in and announce, "We have found water!" It's a dramatic moment! And he calls it this well *Shibah* (well of the oath/covenant.)

I have been looking through guides for healthy conflict resolution this week, and it seems to me that Isaac, the well-digger, demonstrates many of these strategies that bring life and re-connection into our relationships: **(Slide)**

- **Firstly, he is prepared to acknowledge that conflict is occurring - to literally name the conflict.**
- **Secondly, he demonstrates calm, non-defensive and respectful reactions in response to aggression.**
- **Thirdly, he is prepared to listen, to work out a reconciliation.**
- **And fourthly, he shows a willingness to forgive and move on without holding onto resentment and anger.**

There are alternatives, unfortunately, to being people of peace, to being patient persistent well-diggers, and I also came across this guide – a tongue in cheek guide - from Mennonite conflict resolution facilitator and trainer, Ron Kraybill for 'how to turn a disagreement into a feud'. **(Slide)**

- **Develop and maintain a fear of conflict (don't deescalate any emotion).**
- **When you state your concerns, be as vague and general as possible. Then the other person cannot do anything practical to change the situation.**

- **Assume you know all the facts and are totally right. Using clinching Bible verses is very helpful.**
- **Judge the motivation of the other party on any previous experience that showed failure or unkindness. Keep track of every angry word.**
- **If the discussion becomes serious, view it as a win or lose struggle. Avoid solutions and go for total victory. Don't put too many options on the table.**

(Taken from full list by Ron Kraybill, quoted in Tell it to the Church, Lynn Buzzard, David C. Cook, 1982, p. 23)

We do have options according to this story about Isaac. We have options to be lifelong well-diggers, people who despite opposition, despite discouragement, face and name conflict, who patiently persist in doing good, who are not aggressive, who are prepared to listen and are prepared to work out solutions with other people.

We have these options because – if we take this genealogy seriously - well-digging is part of our DNA. We are children of Abraham, as we heard last week, and children of Isaac, and we are members of the household of God through the work of the great well-digger, Jesus. The one who, Ephesians 2:14, put all the options on the table, who gave his life to be "*our peace....[to break] down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.... He came and proclaimed peace to [us] who were far off and to those who were near,*" and who has reconciled us to God through his own life and example.

I have been thinking about well-diggers this week. About Isaac and his persistence, his moving on, his contributing to dig wells, to bring life to communities. My great great great uncles (Julie-ann's great great grandfather) choosing peace over anger beside the Lane Cove River. About Peace Pilgrim (Mildred Norm) who patiently persisted in walking – she was on her seventh journey across the US mainland when she died – to witness to peace.

And perhaps most of all our beautiful friend Simon Carey Holt, who died this week. I don't think I have met anyone who could listen as well and as deeply as Simon, who persevered despite discouragement in quietly doing good, who was not afraid to speak truth, to stand up for compassion, but did it so gently, and who worked to bring people together – and then cooked and served the most magnificent feast!

Simon, our friend, we will miss you, but with joy we will continue to draw water from the wells of salvation.

There are so many options – so many ways of being well-diggers – of bringing peace to our relationships and to our world. Let us sing together this hymn – *This thread I weave.*