

Broad Places

Genesis 26:12–33

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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We're going to spend one last Sunday in the book of Genesis in our summer series on "Seeking Peace Together."

We've looked at the squabbling twins Jacob and Esau, at their conflict and eventual reconciliation. Today we're looking at a story involving their dad Isaac and his adventures in the land of Gerar.

A theme that has emerged throughout our summer series so far is that the characters of the bible give us an honest, unvarnished window into the human condition.

At times, they are faithful and righteous and peace-seeking; at times they are deceptive, manipulative, and violent. At times they are just plain stupid.

The human condition, you may have noticed, is stubbornly persistent across time.

I was presented with rich confirmation of this truth yesterday in my morning tour of the news.

It seems that Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg are planning on fighting each other in some sort of cage match. Like, actually *physically* fighting.

For those who might not be familiar with these two names, these are among the richest men on the planet.

Elon Musk is head of SpaceX, Tesla, and more recently Twitter (which he has renamed X). He's worth around \$230 billion.

Mark Zuckerberg is the founder of Facebook, which has now bought up pretty much every other social media company under the sun and rebranded as Meta. Zuckerberg, according to the internet, is worth a mere \$108 billion.

These guys seem not to like each other much. Evidently, Musk proposed the fight because we was irritated by Meta's launch of Threads, which is designed to be a rival to Twitter (or, X), the social media platform that Musk owns.

So, obviously all that's left to do is settle things properly, like men.

Two middle-aged executives who have a combined net worth that is close to the GDP of Argentina are going to pummel each other with fists in a cage.

Maybe in Las Vegas, maybe in Rome, maybe out in space? Who knows. They're going to donate to the proceeds of this spectacle to their various foundations, so that's nice.

The natural question is, why? Why on *earth* would these two guys want to do this?

Well, human stupidity is a powerful thing, and one should never underestimate it. Same goes for the male ego (it's almost impossible to imagine two women acting like this). And who knows, maybe they're just bored and looking for something to do. I imagine counting your billions could get tedious after a while.

But on some level, however far beneath the surface it is buried, I think this is nothing less than a turf war. There isn't room for two egos this size.

It's not as though either of these men are struggling to make their mortgage payments. But one interprets the other's movements as a threat to the other. One tries to muscle in on the other's share of the social media market. And the petty juvenile behaviour begins.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann uses the phrase "the myth of scarcity" to describe what motivates has motivated much of human behaviour throughout history, throughout our long leaving of the Garden.

We fear that there is not enough for everyone—not enough food, land, resources, goodwill, love...—and that we must seize and hoard what we can for ourselves.

When we buy into the "myth of scarcity," says Brueggemann, we become the central actors in the story of the world rather than God.

We decide how much is enough (often on behalf of others), we decide how much we need. *Our* (perceived) needs and desires become the primary factor in how we look at the world and how we relate to those around us.

It is a myth that is easy to buy into, whether as gazillionaires, or as regular people.

Our story from Genesis this morning is about room—finding room, making room, and enjoying room.

It's a relatively straightforward story. Let's set the scene with just a bit of background to where our reading started today.

There is a famine in the land of Canaan, so Isaac heads down to live in Gerar, the land of the Philistines.

Isaac, like his father, tries to pass his wife off as his sister to avoid trouble. He's evidently afraid that her beauty will lead the locals to knock him off and take her for themselves (virtually the identical scene takes place in Genesis 20 with Abraham and Sarah).

King Abimelech one day sees Isaac and Rebekah acting in ways that brothers and sisters don't typically act and figures out that he's been lied to.

This continues the theme we've been noticing throughout our time in Genesis so far. These are flawed characters. Sinners and saints, just like the rest of us.

Also, a word on the chronology. In the narrative, our text this morning takes place in between the story of Jacob stealing Esau's birthright and the story of him stealing a final blessing.

This is weird, at least for us. Clearly, Isaac and Rebekah don't have children when they go to Gerar (the whole "sister" thing would have been tough to pull off with a couple of whining twins in the background).

So, the chronology is off.

This fits with ancient storytelling methods that were less concerned with the specific order of events than with the significance they played in the broader narrative. The technical word for this is anachrony—a story inserted out of order to make a point.

Some commentators speculate that this story was placed here in between the deceptions of Jacob to highlight the centrality of God’s promise (which is repeated twice in this chapter).

Perhaps its location is meant to remind readers of what Eugene Roop calls “the quiet working of God’s blessing,”¹ this kind of hidden factor which cannot be controlled by Abimelech nor destroyed by erratic and fractious behaviour of Isaac’s sons.

At any rate, all this is just background detail.

In the text we heard today, we see that despite his original deception, the Lord has indeed blessed Isaac.

He is fantastically successful, and his crops prosper. This doesn’t sit particularly well with the Philistines, who block up his wells and send him away. Isaac keeps on moving around and keeps on meeting with resistance wherever he goes.

Even though the text meanders to its conclusion, and even though we might wonder about the king’s motives, and even though there are tensions bubbling just beneath the surface throughout, eventually there is peace. Isaac and King Abimelech sign an agreement whereby Isaac is allowed a place to stay.

Isaac names the spot “Rehoboth,” which in Hebrew means “room” or “space.” Some translate it “broad places,” which I like.

For the time being, at least, the myth of scarcity does not win the day. There is enough for everyone.

Brueggemann contrasts the “myth of scarcity” with “the liturgy of abundance”:

The conflict between the narratives of abundance and of scarcity is the defining problem confronting us at the turn of the millennium. The gospel story of

¹ Eugene F. Roop, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Genesis* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987), 179.

abundance asserts that we originated in the magnificent, inexplicable love of a God who loved the world into generous being... each of us has been miraculously loved into existence by God. And the story of abundance says that our lives will end in God, and that this well-being cannot be taken from us. In the words of St. Paul, neither life nor death nor angels nor principalities nor things -- nothing can separate us from God.

What we know about our beginnings and our endings, then, creates a different kind of present tense for us. We can live according to an ethic whereby we are not driven, controlled, anxious, frantic or greedy, precisely because we are sufficiently at home and at peace to care about others as we have been cared for.²

Fundamentally, peacebuilding is an act of trust.

If God isn't who he says he is, it makes no sense to seek peace in a conflicted and violent world dominated by the myth of scarcity.

It makes no sense for Isaac *not* to stay and fight—to defend himself and his property and the land he has settled against Abimelech and the Philistines if he does not believe that that same God who promised to bless his father Abraham and to make him a blessing to the nations, is also guiding and leading his paths.

Isaac does not act the way he does because he is committed to the “cause” of peace or because he believes in nonviolence as some kind of abstract principle.

He acts the way he does because he trusts that God is who God says he is, and that God will do what God has promised to do.

Well, it's all fine and good to hear a story about how refusing violence results in a (more or less) happy ending with Isaac and the Philistines in Gerar.

But what about us? What does this mean for us?

² <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=533>

I think fundamentally the question for us, like it was for Isaac, is this: **Do we operate out of a worldview of fear or one of love and trust?**

Do we believe that God's world is one of scarcity or abundance?

Do we believe that our posture towards others is fundamentally one of competition where we have to fight to protect our own interests and viewpoints and reputations, like Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg, or the Philistines who keep stopping up Isaac's wells?

Or can we "make space" for others (relational, spiritual, political, conversational, physical)?

Do we, like Isaac, trust the promise and the character of God for the future or do our actions and our words imply that we *really* believe that we are responsible to secure and protect what we need and want for ourselves?

A crucial part of being people of peace is allowing one another space. Space comes in many different forms.

- **Physical space** (even though we've been terrible at this throughout history, with so many conflicts, whether between individuals or nations and empires, reducing to someone trying to take land from someone else).
- **Conversational space** – not needing to dominate, or to bring everything back to ourselves.
- **Theological space** — we really struggle with this one, but I think part of what it means to be spiritually healthy people is to admit that we don't know everything, and that we could be wrong—even about God. That those that we disagree with may have something to teach us!

We can allow each other to be truly "other" and not demand that others conform to our expectations or our preferences or our understanding of what they ought to be and do.

We can live this way **only** if we are convinced that there is God of abundance who wants good—for ourselves and our neighbours—and that this abundant God is pulling our stories and the story of the cosmos along toward a future of *shalom* for all.

Seeking peace with our neighbours demands that we give each other room.

Room to grow. Room to learn.

Room to make mistakes. I read a quote this week from David Brooks in the *New York Times* that made me pause. He begins by quoting a leader in the LDS church:

David A. Bednar... once observed that “one of the greatest indicators of our own spiritual maturity is revealed in how we respond to the weaknesses, the inexperience and the potentially offensive actions of others.”

In other words, a sign of maturity is the ability to respond with understanding when other people have done something stupid and given you the opportunity to feel superior.³

It seems to me that we too often expect perfection from one another and then respond poorly when we discover that—surprise!—other people are just like us, sinners and saints, people who make mistakes.

We need to give each other room to be human.

Room to hear and respond to the voice of God.

In the last year of his life—a life dedicated to just this—Henri Nouwen wrote the following words in his journal:

Only one thing seems clear to me. Every day should be well lived. What a simple truth! Still, it is worth my attention. Did I offer peace today? Did I bring a smile to someone’s face? Did I say words of healing? Did I let go of my anger and resentments? Did I forgive? Did I love? These are the real questions. I must trust that the little bit of love that I sow now will bear many fruits here in this world and in the life to come.⁴

I think that if we pursue these kinds of things, we will be Rehoboth people, people of the broad places.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/10/opinion/trauma-mental-health-culture-war.html>

⁴ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Sabbatical Journey: The Diary of his Final Year* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 61.

People who seek peace and extend mercy because we believe that ultimately the story we are a part of is a story of love rather than fear.

Of course, in a sermon about conflict over water and wells, I cannot resist the temptation to end with Jesus. Actually, I think all sermons should end with Jesus, even those anchored in OT stories.

Isaac and Abimelech's conflict centers around who has access to water and who doesn't.

One of the most well-known stories in the gospels also takes place at a well. In John 4, Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at a well. It's actually a well that was dug by Jacob, way back in Genesis 48.

The disciples have gone into town to buy food and this woman has come to the well alone. Given what we learn of this woman's marital history, we know that she's coming to the well alone because she's a bit of a social outcast, looked down upon by the other people from her village.

So here we have an unlikely pair. Jesus, the devout Jewish rabbi on his way to Jerusalem, and a lonely, troubled, Samaritan woman.

Jesus asks her for a drink. She's confused by this. Why is this Jewish man even speaking with her, much less asking for a drink? He doesn't even have a bucket to draw with.

Their conversation dances around between the literal the symbolic, and then we read the words of John 4:13-14:

Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.'

Jesus is of course speaking metaphorically. He's not talking about the kind of water that you draw from a well, but of eternal life, life in the fullest, deepest sense of the word, in this life and in the life to come.

There is no scarcity in God's kingdom. There are no turf wars, no squabbling over blessings or birthrights, no scrambling to get what we can so that someone else doesn't.

It is the broadest of broad places. There is enough for all, and it is offered as a free gift.

All we have to do is ask.

Amen.

