

Sermon: Reflection on Genesis 25:7 to 10

Year A, Proper 11

[Genesis 25:7-10](#)

Offered July 23, 2017 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

It is such a little bit of text, this description of Abraham's death and burial. We have walked through chapters and chapters of his life, from Ur to Haran to Hebron. We have met his family, his wife Sarah and her slave girl Hagar, the two sons he had, one from each woman. Ishmael, his oldest, will go on to found one nation. Isaac, his youngest, will go on to found another.

We have walked through chapters and chapters of the adventures of Abraham's life, learning his family story. He was a faithful man and beloved of God. But tested too. Sometimes Abraham relied on God and sometimes he relied on himself. He lived a good life, a life he had handed over to God.

It is such a little bit of text, full of facts and figures and real estate transactions. And even if we are not experts in the burial traditions of ancient Israel, we know what we're hearing. Abraham died a good death.¹ He lived to a ripe old age. He died with his sons on hand. He was buried next to his wife on the plot of land he had purchased for just that reason.

There is a bit more in this passage that I see now that I have served this church in rural New Hampshire for three years or so. I have buried people I have never met, nor have I met their families. We may leave our small towns to go out into the world to make our fortunes. But we come home to be gathered to our people (Genesis 25:8), to be laid to rest.

Now Abraham is not from this place. He is from Ur. When Ishmael and Isaac bury him in the cave of Machpelah, in a field east of Mamre, in the place that Abraham bought to bury Sarah, they are accepting his declaration of where his family is from. Abraham may have been a man from Ur. He may see that fact as so important to his identity that he will send a servant all the way back to there, 750 miles or so, to find a suitable wife for Isaac. Abraham may have been a man from Ur, but he is being buried in the land of the Hittites. He has raised his family there. He has doubtless worked side by side with the Hittites. Part of telling about the good death of a good man is describing where he is laid to rest. Abraham is laid to rest in the land of people who are different from him because he lived the life God called him to with people who were not like him.

It is such a little bit of text, such a baldly factual description of what happened at the end of Abraham's 175 years. But now that I have served this church in rural New Hampshire for three years or so, I see what's missing from the text. Funerals bring out the best and worst in people. As people struggle with their grief, I hear heartwarming stories of Thanksgiving banquets cooked in kitchens no bigger than a postage stamp with budgets so tight that the turkey soup was almost as monumental as the roasted bird. As people struggle with their grief, I also hear heartbreaking stories of betrayal and greed and humiliation. And I hear stories about other members of the family told so I know "what they're really like." And maybe they are like that. But they leave town after the funeral, so I don't find out on my own.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 203.

When I read this bit of text about Abraham's sons Isaac and Ishmael burying their father, I don't hear how Isaac was just covering up for this short coming or that Ishmael really had that underlying motive. The text of the Bible, so richly capable of throwing the slightest shades of meaning, simply has the two brothers standing side by side, honoring their father, doing what was right. The text doesn't say that they became best friends either, falling into each other's arms like Jacob and Esau when Jacob returned from his own wife collecting trip to Ur. It doesn't say that either. It says that together they did right by their dad.

Part of a good death is that it is all of a piece with the life that came before it.² Abraham lived among people who were very different from him. When he died, he was buried among them. Abraham's life was defined by the faith that led him to father not one son but two and then to give both of them up to God's purpose, to trust in God's commitment that both would found nations. Both his sons were with him in the end, still serving God's purpose in their own lives.

When they parted, Ishmael went home to his family, a big family with many descendants. One of whom would be the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam. Isaac would go home to his family, a big family with many descendants. One of whom would be Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity. I am not saying the Muhammad and Jesus are the same. They are not. There are long traditions which go into great depth exploring how God is revealed through Muhammad and Jesus and those long traditions in no way imply that the two are equivalent. What I am saying is that the family stories of both Muhammad and Jesus lead back to Abraham, lead back to this moment when two sons of Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac, stand together.

In this service to worship God, two daughters of Abraham stand side by side. Both of us have had our lives changed by the God of Abraham. Sometimes we have relied on God, sometimes we have relied on ourselves. Neither of us is from Brookline. But God has brought our lives here. You may not be Hittites, but there are times when you are strangers to us, and we marvel at how we live with and serve a people so different from the people we grew up with. We have good lives and we do what we can to honor the God who has given us these lives.

Sacred texts can divide us as people. History has proven that only too well. Catholics and Protestants and Orthodox. Christian and Jew and Muslim. Colonizer and the Colonized. When we look through our sacred texts to see the rest of humanity, we will have one view of the world. When we look through them to catch a glimpse of the God who has created all of us, we may see something different. It may be easier to experience that change in perspective by looking at a little bit of sacred text which is rarely noticed. It may be easier to remember that different perspective when two daughters of Abraham stand side by side in a rural country church in New Hampshire in a community they are both a part of and try to do right by the God they both follow.

² Brueggemann, 203.