

Sunday, September 10, 2017
Genesis 26:1-33

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Living by the promise

Today begins the 4-part series on “Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery” in the Faith and Issues Sunday school class. Although I know we won’t all be attending the class, I wanted to offer something during the worship service that could at least help all of us begin to thoughtfully consider this doctrine; it’s an important awareness for us to have. I’m not going to talk directly about the doctrine – I think Karin and Erica will explain to us during the class what it actually is, but I’d like to do some Bible study and some teaching from a perspective that might help us think a little differently about some of our Biblical understandings and, therefore, help us to understand the doctrine and the questions it raises.

The story about Isaac from Genesis 26 is one of the texts used in the Biblical reflections part of the “Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery” study guide put together by the coalition of that same name. The coalition is sponsored by Mennonite Church USA as well as Mennonite Central Committee, Central States.

This lesson was written by Safwat Marzouk, professor of Old Testament at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. Here’s a bit of background about Safwat. He is Egyptian and he grew up with interfaith dialogue among Christians, Jews and Muslims that influenced their daily life. As a Christian, Safwat focused his study on the Old Testament so that he could better understand God’s vision of shalom. In this study of Genesis 26, he makes three main points.

First, he points out that there are different narratives told in the Old Testament about *how* the Hebrew people returned to the land after the Babylonian exile. Some, (those with which we are most familiar) are stories of conquest, like in the Exodus where God’s promise of the land included God driving out the people who lived there. You remember... “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go, leave this place, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, and go to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, ‘To your descendants I will give it.’ I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites... Take care NOT to make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you are going... You shall tear down their altars, break their pillars, and cut down their sacred poles...” And God went on, in the Exodus narrative, to command them, again, NOT to make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land. But the *reason* God gave for not making a covenant was that the Hebrew people would not be strong enough in their faith to resist the temptations of joining in the worship of false gods during the covenant-making process. Exodus 34:15 and following: You shall not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to their gods, someone among them will invite you, and you will eat of the sacrifice.” It wasn’t because God thought covenant-making was a bad idea; it was because God didn’t trust the people to maintain their faith and trust in God!

In the Genesis narrative, the land was promised by God, but getting it did not entail violent conquest. In the Genesis story, God's promise of land and offspring was tied to the identity of the faith community as migrants, aliens and strangers.

This is the second point. In verse 3 of Genesis 26, God commands Isaac: "Reside in this land as an alien, and I will be with, and will bless you..." Isaac's status is to be an alien *who lives by the promise*. And that promise gives him a sense of orientation, direction, rootedness and connection; it gives a sense of hope and meaning for the journey. "Living by the promise", Prof. Marzouk writes, "and claiming the status of alien as an identity marker liberates them from the rigid boundaries that are constructed by fear. They are liberated to take the risk of not only sharing the land and the resources, but also of opening themselves to right relations with their neighbors." Isaac likely migrated to Gerar because of a famine. The survival of the faith community would hinge on the generosity of "outsiders". In this case, those outsiders were the Philistines, who became a refuge. Suddenly they were "insiders" with the power to show either hospitality or hostility. "Being an alien is about facing the risk of being under the power of an "other" to whom we entrust our very selves." It's a situation fraught with fear and threat. Will the host and the guest find ways to avoid conflict and violence? Will they be able to overcome the fear of the other?

Again, I quote Marzouk, "As a refugee, a migrant, and an alien in the land of the Philistines, Isaac initially prospers. His agricultural produce is blessed by the Lord. 'Isaac sowed seed in that land, and in the same year reaped a hundredfold. The Lord blessed him. And the man became rich; he prospered more and more until he became very wealthy'. (verses 12-13) He has possessions of flocks and herds, and a great household, so that the Philistines *envy* him. His prosperity becomes a threat... Envy and fear ruin peaceful relationships. They distort the ability to show hospitality. They hold people back from sharing land, resources. In this story, (envy and fear) lead to two related developments: (first) the Philistines fill the wells with dirt so that Isaac will not be able to sow the land or offer water to his cattle and family. Then Abimelech asks Isaac to leave: 'Go away from us; you have become too powerful for us'. Furthermore, 'the herders of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herders, saying, 'The water is ours'. Because Isaac lives by the promise and (claims) the status of a migrant, he does not use force to conquer these neighbors who have become afraid of him. He simply moves away. (Now) before we (put too much) blame (on) the Philistines, we should remember that Isaac lied to them (right off the bat) about Rebekah (being his sister rather than his wife... remember that?) It is possible that this incident contributed to the fears of the Philistines since they probably lost trust in him.

Here's the third point: "Despite the fear and broken relationships, the Philistine (King, Abimelech) reaches out to Isaac and they bridge the gap (caused by) fear, mistrust and envy. In verse 26 the political and military leaders went to Isaac, not to fight but to seek peace. When Isaac sees them, he does not reject them, but at the same time, he does not sweep the recent conflict under the rug. He peacefully confronts them: 'Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?' They tell him that they recognize he is blessed, and that there is an alternative to fear, envy and broken relationships. They ask for a covenant between them... Isaac agrees and extends his own hospitality, throwing a party for them. They exchange oaths and make a covenant.

This text offers an alternative to the Conquest narratives by telling the story of families of different tribes and nations being able to coexist and share the land and resources. In this episode, peace between Isaac, the sojourner, and his neighbors happens neither by creating rigid borders nor by losing boundaries. Peace happens when both parties treat each other as (equals) capable of being accountable partners in a covenant that seeks to find a way for a politics of coexistence to overcome the politics of fear and mistrust.”

Why haven't we heard this narrative more often? Honestly, I didn't remember reading this story before. The Conquest stories, on the other hand, are abundantly familiar. Could it be that The Church has consistently taught the stories of conquest because those stories suit the church's agenda?

At the end of the lesson, Safwat offers these facts and questions: “Between 1778 and 1871, the U.S. government ratified over 370 treaties with Native American nations, and broke, changed or nullified every single one. In this context of broken relationships, is it possible for Christians and/or U.S. citizens to live as people of covenant?”

For those of us who are settlers, how could an understanding of ourselves as migrants and sojourners change how we view our rights to the land and our relationships with host peoples?”

There is much for us to learn and consider. May God grant us light and wisdom. Amen.