

## The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity

It's not unusual for a song to pop into my mind as I'm preparing a sermon. The soundtrack for this week's writing was *The Gambler* by Kenny Rogers.

*You got to know when to hold 'em, Know when to fold 'em,  
Know when to walk away, Know when to run.*

In the account found in Genesis 26, Isaac isn't sitting in a dark, smoky room, drinking whisky and gambling with his neighbors. But he does calculate in more than one situation, that it's better to walk away than to stay and fight, even though it's likely he would have prevailed. He demonstrates the liturgy of abundance and refutes the myth of scarcity.

You may not be familiar with this story about Isaac, because even though he is one of the three primary patriarchs of the faith, he doesn't get much attention in scripture. This story is the only one focused on Isaac, without his father, Abraham, or his sons Jacob and Esau squeezing onto center stage. And in this one story, Isaac shows himself to be a man of peace.<sup>1</sup>

Let's review Isaac's life. He was the long-awaited son of Abraham and Sarah, bringing laughter to them when they were both very old.<sup>2</sup> He was the survivor of a traumatic experience during his adolescence when he accompanied his father to Mt Moriah to worship God and nearly lost his life in a test of Abraham's obedience to God. His life was spared, but we don't know how this ordeal affected his relationship with his father.<sup>3</sup> He was the husband of Rebekah who could be thought of as a mail-order bride from Haran. Because Abraham didn't want his son to marry a Canaanite woman, he sent his servant back to his homeland. The servant returned with Rebekah, who Isaac grew to love deeply and who comforted him after his mother's death.<sup>4</sup> He was the victim of fraud. His wife, Rebekah, and son, Jacob, conspired to fool him in his old age to rob his favored son, Esau, of his blessing.<sup>5</sup>

The story of Isaac and his neighbors begins with a familiar occurrence in Palestine. A drought and subsequent famine force Isaac and his family to leave their home and travel to a foreign land, ruled by the Philistine king, Abimelech. God appears to Isaac, tells him not to go to Egypt where there's likely plenty of food, and instructs him to stay in a place which is in slightly better shape than the home they left. God promises to be with Isaac, to bless him, to give him land, to make his descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and to bless all nations through him – continuing the promise God made to Abraham.

Isaac is fortunate. Because of his inheritance, he arrives in this foreign land with money, livestock, servants, and warriors. He wields considerable wealth and power, so much, in fact, that King Abimelech is intimidated by Isaac and urges him to settle somewhere else. Isaac complies, even though his accumulated wealth gives him a level of power that he could have used to defy the king's request.

He moves back to an area where his father had lived. He discovers that the inhabitants of the land – the Philistines – have stopped up the wells that Abraham dug. Isaac re-opens the wells without expressing antagonism toward the ones who filled them in or condemning their aggressive acts.

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon draws from the Week Eight Prepare Essay and Sermon Notes written by Joanna Harader, *Current: Seeking Peace Together*, a digital curriculum from MennoMedia, [Current - Menno Media](#); Robert Bowman, "Bible insight for the teacher," *Gather 'Round Multiage Teacher's Guide*, Summer 2012, MennoMedia; and Eugene Ropp, *Genesis BCBC*, Herald Press, 1987, pp.173-180.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 21

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 22

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 24

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 27

Then, of course, he digs his own wells. Not surprisingly, these wells become a source of contention in this arid land. Local herdsman claim one well and then another for their own. Each time, Isaac lets the herders have the well and moves on to another location. The names Isaac gives the wells reveal the escalating animosity. The first is *Esek* meaning “contention,” which is simply a statement of reality. The second is *Sitnah* meaning “enmity,” which describes the negative feelings involved. Finally, out of understanding, kindness, or sheer weariness, the herders don’t bother Isaac about the third well, so he names it *Rehoboth*, meaning “broad place.” He says, “Now the Lord has given us room and we will flourish in the land.”<sup>6</sup>

From there, Isaac travels to Beersheba, builds an altar, and worships God. God appears and repeats words of blessing. King Abimelech visits Isaac again. This time he doesn’t ask Isaac to move away. His men don’t take Isaac’s wells. Instead, Abimelech asks to make a pact of peace with Isaac so they can live in friendship.

What might Isaac’s saga say to us? More than a story of relinquishing wells, it’s a story of relinquishing power. If Isaac had chosen to insist on his rights with a show of force, he certainly would have won. It might be easier to understand Isaac’s response if he had been weaker than his challengers. It’s harder to understand why the side with the rights and the power chose to walk away.

But who has the rights to the water in this land? From our best understanding of Isaac’s culture, it seems he had a right to the wells that his servants dug. We could also make a case for indigenous herders being able to access water on the land they have tended for generations. It seems likely that this was a legitimate dispute over water rights and not only a bullying tactic by the herders (as depicted in the video we watched).

We don’t know whether Isaac considers the position and rights of the herders or whether he simply wants to avoid a fight. The end result is the same: Isaac lets the herders have the well and moves on to another location. Rather than insist on occupying space that others wished to inhabit, Isaac recognizes the spaciousness of the land and finds a place where he and his community can live without interfering with other people.

Isaac was envied and confronted by people who didn’t have as much water, as much wealth, and as much power as he did. Many acts of violence in our world are motivated by fear that there isn’t enough. Ours is a society that believes deeply in the myth of scarcity. It’s quite easy to observe this in all levels of society – familial, local, national, and international.

I recommend an article written by Walter Brueggemann titled “The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity.”<sup>7</sup> He begins with these words, “The majority of the world’s resources pour into the United States. And as we Americans grow more and more wealthy, money is becoming a kind of narcotic for us. We hardly notice our own prosperity or the poverty of so many others. The great contradiction is that we have more and more money and less and less generosity – less and less public money for the needy, less charity for the neighbor.

Brueggemann then recounts places in the Bible where God’s abundance is celebrated. God’s generosity at creation is told in Genesis and celebrated in the Psalms. God’s blessing of Abraham, Sarah and their family extends to the people of all nations. Blessing is the force of well-being active in the world, and faith is the awareness that creation is the gift that keeps on giving.

Brueggeman also describes the time when the myth of scarcity is introduced. In Genesis 47, Pharaoh dreams that there will be a famine in the land. He gets organized to administer, control and monopolize the food supply. Pharaoh introduces the principle of scarcity into the world economy. Because Pharaoh is afraid that there aren’t enough good things to go around, he must try to have them all. Because he is fearful, he is ruthless.

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 26:22, *New International Version*

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.religion-online.org/article/the-liturgy-of-abundance-the-myth-of-scarcity/>

Brueggeman then brings it home to us. “We who are now the richest nation are today's main coveters. We never feel that we have enough; we have to have more and more, and this insatiable desire destroys us. Whether we are liberal or conservative Christians, we must confess that the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity – a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly. We spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity.

“Wouldn't it be wonderful if liberal and conservative church people, who love to quarrel with each other, came to a common realization that the real issue confronting us is whether the news of God's abundance can be trusted in the face of the story of scarcity? Think of the ministry of Jesus. Everywhere he went he broke the vicious cycles of poverty, bondage, fear, and death; he healed, transformed, empowered and brought new life. Jesus' example gives us the mandate to transform our public life.”

Although this article is almost 25 years old, the message remains relevant. However, the world has changed since then. We are now confronted by the ways explorers and settlers mistreated indigenous people, cheated them, and forced them off the land they inhabited. This changes the way we view Isaac's story. Now we might view the local herders as rightful land holders and not bullies.

It also changes the way we view our wealth, especially those of us who have benefitted from farmland. This is quite personal to me. How do I honor the hard work and stewardship of my brother, father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, while also recognizing that, in some respects, the land wasn't rightfully theirs and now isn't rightfully mine? While no-one in my family pushed the indigenous people off the land, they benefitted from the actions of the ones who did.

As our climate changes, we can certainly relate to the water issues at the center of today's story. Debates over water rights and water appropriation programs are becoming more heated, frequent, and widespread in this country. Who has the power in these debates? How do they use that power? Is it possible to have an attitude of abundance when scarcity is no longer a myth? I'm not sure, but our faith compels us to seek a way of peace and sometimes that means giving up power and walking away from conflict.

It's important to note, however, that there are times when walking away isn't the most faithful option. We should not encourage those on the margins to submit to those in power to maintain peace. And sometimes peacemakers need to walk into conflict and stand up for what is right and fair and just. Finding the best course of action takes discernment and wisdom.

Isaac can be a peacemaker and walk away from conflict because he does not have a scarcity mindset. He believes there is enough water—even in the desert—for everyone. He does not have to insist on his right to one particular well because he can dig another. He does not have to stay in a location where he is encroaching on the livelihood of others because the land is broad. Isaac's understanding of God's abundance and willingness to walk away from conflict allows him to maintain a good relationship with God and even with those who consider him an enemy.

May we let the knowledge of God's abundance release us from our fear of scarcity and free us to live with generosity toward each other, our neighbors, and the world.