

Genesis 25.19-34 (St. Michael's – July 16, 2017)

So religion is a funny thing. You've probably heard the critique of faith – a 'pie in the sky when you die.' For many, religion is a vague, abstract, theoretical, sort of thing – something you might indulge when you're feeling whimsical. Because it's not tangible, it's not practical, it's not well-defined. It's like when someone told C.S. Lewis that they envisioned God as an ethereal tapioca in the sky.

So how does religion, and specifically Christianity respond to this critique? Are we just a bunch of high-flying, ivory-tower egg-heads? Or is there substance to what we profess?

Today I'm going to suggest that our answer is not really either-or, but both-and. Our faith *is* profoundly earthy, but at the same time it is ethereal and has eternal consequences. Earthy and ethereal. Both-and.

In Genesis 25 we have a striking vision of the both-and. Isaac is married to Rebecca. And Isaac and Rebecca have a problem. They can't have a baby. For 20 years they've been trying to conceive and nothing has happened.

My friends, life doesn't get much more earthy than this. Infertility. So much pain and disappointment. In Scripture we read of people struggling with infertility crying out to God with such emotion, that it looks like they're drunk.

And so what do Isaac and Rebecca do? How does their faith intersect this very earthy dilemma? Verse 21: 'Isaac prayed for his wife because she was barren.' My friends, this is prayer. Isaac doesn't pray for cosmic oneness, world peace, or that the whales would be saved. He prays for his wife because she was barren. This is the earthy cry of a human heart.

Instead of prayer Isaac could *easily* have done several other things. First, he could have taken matters into his own hands. 'OK God, you're not coming through, I'm going to fix this on

my own.’ Isaac could easily have had children by another woman. This is what his father Abraham did. When Abraham’s wife Sarah was barren, Abraham had a child with his servant Hagar. And this caused all kinds of domestic conflict. Do you ever feel the temptation to take matters into your own hands? To get ahead of God?

The second thing Isaac could have done was resign himself to the situation. After all, what if he prays and God doesn’t answer his prayer? You ever wondered that? Maybe it would be better not to get our hopes up? Maybe it would be easier just to say, ‘You know God, you’re almighty and all powerful, you can fix this if you want. I’m just going to wash my hands and not worry about it.’ This kind of pious resignation is very common.

One of my favorite preachers was an incredible scholar and teacher, who was stricken with cancer in the year 2000 at the age of 62, and died a few months later. In his very last sermon he addressed his flock with these words:

‘Should you pray for a miracle? Well, you’re free to do that, of course. My general impression is that the God who is able to do miracles—and he certainly can—is also able to keep you from getting the problem in the first place. So although miracles do happen, they’re rare by definition. A miracle has to be an unusual thing. I think it’s far more profitable to pray for wisdom for the doctors...the effectiveness of the treatment...[and especially that God would be glorified through suffering].’

Now I by no means want to criticize, but do you hear a hint of resignation? ‘Miracles are rare, so pray for a conventional solution.’ This man is one of my heroes, yet I was saddened by this approach.

Because when we look to Jesus, if anything his concern seems to be *not* that we ask for too much but that we ask for too little. ‘You have not because you ask not.’

Now yes, at the end of the day, God may not answer our prayers the way we want, but what's the alternative? What else are we going to do? What a lot of us do is simply pious resignation, where we stifle the cry of our hearts, thinking we're being 'spiritual.'

But honestly, if you're a parent, don't you want your kids to be honest with you? Even if you're not going to give them what they want, don't you want them to be real with you? How much more does our heavenly Father want to hear the genuine cry of our hearts.

No, I find the Apostle Paul's approach more appealing. In 2nd Corinthians Paul prays to God about a thorn in his flesh, what he calls a 'messenger from Satan.' He *pleads* with God that it will leave him. And what happens? Nothing. So Paul prays again. What happens? Nothing. So Paul prays again. And finally God speaks and says 'no.' He's not going to remove the thorn. *BUT*, His grace will be sufficient. Paul has his answer.

When we pray God's answer is either going to be 'yes,' 'no,' or 'wait.' So rather than hedging our bets or giving in to resignation, why not keep on praying until we hear from God, however long it takes? It's entirely possible that Isaac prayed 20 years before the miracle came. Verse 21: 'And the Lord granted his prayer and Rebekah conceived.'

And so the miracle arrives. Everything is fine and dandy, and Isaac and Rebekah live happily ever after. But that's not really what happens is it? No, the Bible is more earthy than a fairy tale. Verse 22: 'The children struggled together within her and she said, 'Why is this happening to me?'' or another translation, 'Why do I live?'

Yes, something unusual is happening with this pregnancy. One translation: 'the children smashed themselves inside her.' Imagine feeling this discomfort, and not having ultrasound, not having a doctor. What are you going to do? Where are you going to turn?

Once again, they turn to the Lord. Verse 22: ‘So Rebekah went to inquire of the Lord.’ And the Lord speaks to Rebekah and says, ‘There are two nations in your womb and they shall be divided. And the older shall serve the younger.’

Yes, the painful struggle within her womb is a prophetic glimpse of the struggle that is to come between the nations of Israel and Edom, descendants of Jacob and Esau. And ultimately, it’s Jacob, the younger brother, who *surprisingly*, will carry the covenantal promise.

And once again, can you see the both-and? This is so very real, so very messy isn’t it? And yet it’s also transcendent.

This story shows us that in the midst of pain and confusion, God has a plan and a purpose. And His ways are not our ways. God often subverts what is conventional, to show that it’s not about us—our abilities, our position, our goodness. Rather, it’s about *His* choosing and sovereignty.

One of the common ways God undermines convention is by raising up younger brothers—from places of obscurity to places of prominence. We see this with Moses, Isaac, Joseph, Judah, David, Solomon, etc. All younger brothers.

Yes, God delights to surprise us by using weak and obscure people to accomplish mighty things. As Paul writes in 1st Corinthians: ‘God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong...so that no human being might boast.’

I honestly think that if God ever sends someone to save our nation, or to launch the next Great Awakening, it will be someone the world doesn’t expect. Maybe an Irish Catholic, Mexican American woman from Appalachia. That would be something God would do.

And so again, our earthy problems lead us to honest prayers, which are heard by a transcendent God, who intervenes in our lives, often in surprising ways. Do you see the both-and of faith?

And so Rebekah gives birth to the twins. And she takes one look at her firstborn and says, ‘Oh my goodness, I’ve given birth to an Ewok.’ No, actually she says, I’ve given birth to Esau, who comes out red and hairy. And then Jacob comes out clutching Esau’s heel, foreshadowing the struggle that is to come.

And then finally we jump ahead many years later, to when Jacob swindles Esau out of his birthright. You know the story. Esau is out hunting, comes home exhausted, finds Jacob cooking stew, and says ‘feed me, I’m starving.’ His actual words are even more crude than this – something along the lines of ‘let me cram my maw with some of that red stuff.’ And Jacob says, ‘For your birthright’—that is—for your share of the inheritance. And Esau sells his birthright for a bowl of stew.

It’s striking that although the Bible rarely offers explicit moral commentary, it does so here. We read in our last verse, ‘Thus Esau despised his birthright.’ And in the NT, in Hebrews 12, we read, ‘See to it...that no one is unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected...though he sought it with tears.’

In short, when we have earthy problems...we mustn’t seek earthy solutions. Taking things into our own hands, resigning ourselves to the status quo, or seeking immediate gratification like Esau. Rather we must lift up our eyes. To the One who knows our needs and delights to give *good* things to those who ask him.

And especially we should look to Jesus, the one who perfectly bridged the gap between the earthy and the eternal. The God who came to live as one of us, who bore our sins, and healed us by his blood. In Jesus we see heaven and earth perfectly united, and we see that faith was never meant to be theoretical.

Rather, faith is the lifeline which leads us through the shadowed valleys of life and into the presence of God. Faith did it for Jesus, faith will do it for us. As scripture says of Christ, ‘Who for the joy set before him endured the cross, and now is seated at the right hand of God.’

Friday night, about 36 hours ago, my neighbor’s house went up in flames. A two million dollar house, 12,000 square feet, now a pile of ashes. It took a dozen fire trucks 7 hours to stop the blaze. Fortunately no one was hurt, and if you read the *Post and Courier* my cat Puma got her name in the paper.

But late Friday night while cleaning debris off my car, we found a waterlogged piece of paper from a book. I don’t know where it came from, but the piece of paper had a single heading which read: ‘Reflections on the Creator.’ Just that, ‘Reflections on the Creator.’

And as I stood there in the smoke and the stench and the rubble, my mind swirling with a mix of gratitude, anxiety, and a profound sense of *helplessness*. I could not but think, ‘*this* is an image of life without God, of the world without God.’ An image of all temporal and earthy living coming to nothing. Because nothing but His kingdom will endure.

And so my friends, when we are confronted by the earthiness of reality, when our lives seem dry and infertile, when we are overwhelmed by things we cannot understand, when we are tempted by the gratifications of this world, and sometimes when our lives *literally* come crashing down around us—by God’s mercy may we simply have the grace to look up—to the Creator—

where Christ is. And standing on His promises, may we open our hands and hearts to receive from Him. All that we need. Comfort, healing, security, and real hope. For Jesus' sake.