

# *A Summer Staycation in Genesis: Preaching the Old Testament Texts During Ordinary Time*

Elizabeth McGregor Simmons

Davidson College Presbyterian Church, Davidson, North Carolina

Several years ago, I snagged a great fare on Southwest Airlines, boarded a plane in my then-hometown San Antonio, landed in Raleigh-Durham, and spent the next two weeks driving south to St. Augustine, Florida, in a rental car, visiting relatives and friends along the way. These were not casual friends and distant relatives; they were the people who have made me who I am. The time that I spent with them blessed me with another rich layer laid upon our lifetime of relationship.

Year A invites us to embark on a similar summer trip as we drop in on our relatives Abraham and Sarah, their kids, their grandkids, and their great-grandkids during Ordinary Time. The lovely thing about this staycation in Genesis is that it won't cost congregations a penny for airfare or theme park admission.

Some in the congregations to whom you will preach first met Abraham and Sarah in Sunday School, and the stories of their all-too-human clan are as familiar as the pictures in a well-thumbed family photo album. Others possess only a passing acquaintance with these ancient ancestors. And it is entirely likely that there will be some in the pews where you are who will be hearing these stories for the first time.

And so a gentle caution is in order: As you pack your sermonic suitcase, leave the word *familiar* (as in "we all remember the familiar story of Joseph's amazing Technicolor dreamcoat") in the dresser drawer. These stories may be as familiar to you as the oft-laundered T-shirt from your first 5k race or the worn sneakers that you have kept in your closet for a decade because they are perfect for rock hopping in a mountain stream. To some, however, they will be as new as a freshly minted coin. To them, the word *familiar* screams "outsider!!!!" at in-your-face megaphone intensity.<sup>1</sup> It is best for preachers to toss this use of *familiar* on the homiletic scrap heap in order that the stories might do their powerful work of drawing first-time hearers, as well as those who are on a first name basis not only with Abraham and Sarah, but with Hagar, Leah, and Benjamin, into the gracious love of God.

*Trinity Sunday* – Psalm 8 (Genesis 15: 1-6; Genesis 18: 1-15; 21: 1-7)

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;  
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?

By the time the church enters Ordinary Time in 2011, summer is one-third over, and the stories from Genesis, beginning with the call of Abraham in Genesis 12: 1-9, which we might have encountered in other liturgical years, have flown past us unread. However, the lectionary offers Psalm 8 for Trinity Sunday. Might it be possible then to link the Psalmist's skyward gaze to God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 15:5? "[God] brought [Abraham] outside and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the

stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendents be.'"

God makes the covenantal declaration to Abraham in the face of laughable odds. As Sarah says in Genesis 21: 7, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children?"

Surely Sarah would never have said that she would nurse children. The odds against the fulfillment of her heartfelt hope were impossibly long indeed, for, as Frederick Buechner has written, "[Sarah] is an old woman, and, after a lifetime in the desert, her face is cracked and rutted like a six-month drought. She hunches her shoulders around her ears and starts to shake. She squinnies her eyes shut, and her laughter is all China teeth and wheeze and tears running down as she rocks back and forth in her kitchen chair. She is laughing because she is pushing ninety-one hard and has just been told she is going to have a baby."<sup>2</sup> Surely Abraham would never have said that Sarah would nurse children. In Genesis 17, we read that when God repeated the promise to make of the family of Abraham and Sarah a great nation, Abraham couldn't keep a straight face either: "[He] fell on his face and laughed." No one could have imagined that God might accomplish such an unexpected thing. This is precisely what happened however, for as we read in Genesis 21:1, "the LORD did for Sarah as the LORD had promised."

When the authors of Genesis put quill to parchment and penned the stories of our forebears in faith, they did so in order that the people of Israel might read them over and over again from generation to generation, reflecting back on all the times that God had transformed the question, "Who would ever have said...?" into something mysteriously powerful, real, and wonderful. Who would ever have said, for instance, that God would put the finger on Noah who was known as much for hitting the bottle as for his righteousness as the means by which humanity might reinhabit the earth after the great flood? Who would ever have said that Moses who was hiding out in Midian after committing murder would lead God's people out of slavery? Who would ever have said that the son of a poor unwed teenage girl would be the Messiah, God's own Son? No one would have said or even imagined any of these things, but it is the way that God works: by transforming "who would ever have said...?" into amazing life-filled reality. It is the way that God works, and we have a theological word for it—*grace*.

*13<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*—Genesis 22: 1-14

*14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*—Genesis 24: 34-38, 42-49, 58-67

"I confess that I have never liked or understood the story in chapter 22 of the Book of Genesis," Rabbi Harold Kushner has written. "But some years ago, I read an article by a physician suggesting that Isaac may have been a [child with special needs]. He shared many of the traits...He was born to older parents. He periodically gets into trouble by not understanding the consequences of his actions. He is the only man in all the Bible whose parents worry about his getting married and ends up marrying a woman whose outstanding quality is her kindness. If that theory is correct, maybe that is why Abraham thought he heard the voice of God telling him to slay his son, as many societies in the ancient world did to imperfect children. And God's intervening would then represent [God's] proclaiming to Abraham that even such a child is fashioned in God's image, that even such a life is holy, that a child is born to

grow to be himself and not be used to fill in the blank spaces in a parent's ego."<sup>3</sup>

This reading of Genesis 22 is unorthodox to be sure and is surely *midrash* more than strict historical-critical exegesis. However, Kushner's insights serve to shift our perspective in an interesting way from the perennial question associated with the story of the Binding of Isaac, "What sort of God would demand that a father sacrifice his son?" to Isaac's perspective at the point that he is about to be killed on account of his imperfection.

When we read the text from this perspective, that is, from the point of view of our own experience of viewing ourselves as so imperfect as to be beyond saving, we are given to see that God's most important act here is not the demand that Abraham sacrifice his son. Rather, God's most important act is to grab Abraham's knife-grasping hand at the last second through the angel's words and to provide a ram as a substitute for Isaac so that the loved and treasured son might be saved.

This is the way that God works, not only in primitive Old Testament stories, but in the lives of those to whom we preach. Perhaps one of them has experienced it this way. He works twelve hours a day, six days a week. Why does he who could easily spend less time at work and more time in activities and relationships that refresh his spirit work so hard? In his more honest moments, he admits that he works for the day when he will hear his father say, "You don't have to be perfect. I am proud of you just as you are." But he can never hope to hear these words, for his father has been dead for 10 years. But then one day, your congregant comes to church. He slides into his pew, and as the strains of the prelude peal forth, his mind is racing ahead hoping that the service won't run over to 12:05 because he really has to get to the office to finish up some work before Monday morning and his fingers are itching to check his Blackberry for incoming email. The liturgist for the day stands and calls him, calls *him*, to worship, saying "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." And in that moment, he no longer feels like his father's imperfect child. He feels loved. He feels accepted. He feels *saved*.

Perhaps a teenager who is hearing your sermon has hurt someone she loves terribly. She has turned her back on a friend who really needed her. Even though she has apologized, the relationship is still strained, and she wonders if things will ever be set right between them. Then one night the two of them are having pizza, and one of them shares something funny that happened at school that day. The other one responds with a gentle joke. And slowly, but surely, the atmosphere of polite, strained silence that had defined their relationship in recent days is being punctuated by relieved, genuine laughter. And the teenager realizes suddenly that she no longer feels imperfect and sinful. She feels *saved*.

Perhaps in your congregation there is a couple whose son has told them that he is gay. They hadn't told their friends, even their best friends, for fear that they would be judged to be bad parents. They had spent countless sleepless nights reliving years of parenting, asking themselves the question, "What did I do wrong?" But one day one of them picked up a brochure which listed meeting times for a support group for parents and friends of those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered. The two of them talked about it, and with trepidation, they went to the meeting. And over time, in the embrace of a community of folk who live the same struggle that they do, they laid aside the image of the person that they wanted their son to be and their real son came to life for them. They no longer judge themselves to be guilty, imperfect

parents. They know themselves to be *saved*.

*15<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*—Genesis 25: 19-34

*16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*—Genesis 28: 10-19a

*17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*—Genesis 29: 15-28

*18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*—Genesis 32: 22-31

Several years ago, Bill Moyers hosted a PBS series entitled “Genesis: A Living Conversation” in which he assembled four dozen writers, theologians, and artists whom he deemed “a dazzling, multilayered chorus of voices”<sup>4</sup> to plow the furrows of meaning found in these stories. Stephen Mitchell, who had recently completed a translation of Genesis into contemporary, poetic idiom, was one of those who discussed Jacob and Esau, saying, “You can read these stories as dreams or patterns for the soul. And it’s helpful, sometimes, to step into a story and notice where it is that we’re standing.”<sup>5</sup>

In your preaching, take a cue from Mitchell and invite your listeners to step into the stories of Jacob and Esau and notice where they are standing. Invite them to stand in Jacob’s shoes, that is, the shoes of every brother or sister who has ever been jealous of the older, prettier, smarter one. Invite them to notice themselves standing in the shoes of anyone who has ever cheated,<sup>6</sup> from the person who speeds through a school zone because she was distracted by a cell phone conversation, to executives in the corporate suites on Wall Street. Invite them to notice themselves standing in the shoes of every schemer who waits for just the right moment to get “them” before they get you. Invite them to stand in Esau’s shoes, that is, the shoes of every person who has taken a precious relationship for granted and then lost it through sheer carelessness. Invite them to notice themselves standing in the shoes of anyone who has shrugged off integrity for what was at best a temporary, trivial satisfaction. Invite each and every person, including yourself, to stand in the shoes of the characters of these stories and to see how we, like them, participate in the evil, sin, and brokenness which is far from God’s good intentions for humanity.

It is uncomfortable for well-dressed and pressed church folk to acknowledge and confess the ways in which we participate in the brokenness and sin of the world. Yet, it is necessary that we do so for unless we do, we will not be able to embrace the conclusion of Jacob’s and Esau’s story---their reconciliation with one another after a lifetime of estrangement—as a dream or pattern for our souls.

*19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*—Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28

*20<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*—Genesis 45: 1-15

My dear friend Ken Neuenschwander relates that one of his mother’s favorite aphorisms was, “The dreamers are so many; the thinkers are so few.” Mother Neuenschwander divided humanity into two types of people: the dreamers and the thinkers. Dreamers are starry-eyed idealists, spending hours of the day staring off into space while spinning elaborate fantasies of a different world. The thinkers are the opposite: they are practical and competent. For thinkers, an idea has merit only if it can be shaped into something that one can touch or see or apply to the real world.

If one subscribes to these definitions of dreamers and thinkers, Genesis 37 would lead one to categorize Joseph as a dreamer. As Walter Brueggemann puts it, “This boy was born to dream—not to work, not to shepherd.”<sup>7</sup> However, to slap the label “dreamer” on the lapel of Joseph’s amazing Technicolor dreamcoat and leave it at

that is to tell only part of the story. Rather than dividing the world into two types of people, the thinkers and the dreamers, and placing ourselves and our congregants in one or the other of these two categories, we likely hew closer to the truth that the Joseph saga would speak to us if we hear it speaking both to the dreamer and to the thinker that is inside each of us.

In such a reading of Genesis 37, it is necessary, first of all, to define what the dream really is. At the literal level, the dream is a vision of sheaves of grain bowing down, of stars and a sun and a moon bowing down. At a deeper level, however, the dream is a vision of the unsettling work of God to create a new reality. It is an anticipation of a future when God will work through Joseph not to rule over his family, as his brothers, hurling him into a pit with their upcurled lips and their Simon Legree snarls<sup>8</sup> and a bravado that muffles the anxiety which lodges in their hearts, but rather to save them when famine sweeps across the land and they arrive in Egypt with gaunt faces and hollow eyes and empty bellies. And at a deeper level even than this, the dream is a vision of a future not yet borne even in our own day, a future where all eyes are bright and all hunger is satisfied and all hearts are open in a gracious living out of the loving of God and neighbor in every corner of the world.

We need to be dreamers, Joseph's story says to us. We are called to keep the not-too-tactful seventeen-year-old Joseph, who dreams of God's future, alive in us. And the text calls us to remember Jacob too, for he, wearing the patina of age, had been a dreamer in his youth, and now Joseph's dream becomes for him a matter for reflection. He doesn't reject the dream, but explores it by asking probing questions. He "keeps the matter in mind," thus revealing an openness to how God might fulfill this dream in the future.<sup>9</sup>

Joseph's story nourishes the dreamer part of who we are, and it also encourages us to be faithful thinkers too. It encourages us to take that competent, realistic part of who we are, as Joseph would later do when, with some life experience tucked under his belt, he was named Pharaoh's Secretary of Agriculture and managed the affairs of the Egyptian empire so that many would be saved from death, and courageously do what we can to make the dream of justice, peace, and mercy something that real people in this real world can see and touch and experience.

God chose one people for the sake of all.

To the world in its rebellion and alienation

God promised blessing and restoration.

The Lord chose Abraham and his descendants

as bearers of that promise for all peoples.

They had done nothing more than others

to deserve the Lord's favor,

but God loved them and made them God's very own.

We acknowledge God's freedom and grace.

Though we are unworthy,

we have been made God's own in Christ.

God has chosen us as servants for the sake of the world

and destined us to be God's daughters and sons,

giving us love and life,  
calling us to worship and honor God.<sup>10</sup>

### Notes

1. My thanks to Rodger Nishioka for pointing this out in a presentation at the Davidson College Presbyterian congregational retreat in January 2011.
2. Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977), 49.
3. Harold S. Kushner, *How Good Do We Have to Be? A New Understanding of Guilt and Forgiveness* (New York: Little Brown, 1996), 73-74.
4. From the book jacket blurb of Bill Moyers, *Genesis: A Living Conversation* (New York: Doubleday, 1996).
5. *Ibid.*, 270.
6. L. Susan May, "Hold On For Your Blessing," in *Bread Afresh, Wine Anew*, edited by Joan Campbell and David Polk (St. Louis: Chalice, 1991), 13.
7. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1982), 301.
8. John Holbert, "Joseph and the Surprising Choice of God," *Perkins Journal*, Summer 1985, 35.
9. Terence E. Fretheim, *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. I* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 601.
10. *A Declaration of Faith*, Chapter 3, slightly adapted.

Note: An excellent resource for preaching these texts is A. Carter Shelley, *Preaching Genesis 12-26* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001). Unhappily, the book is now out-of-print.