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January 26th: Genesis 25 & John 13

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The death of Abraham; the birth of Esau and Jacob; Esau despises his birthright. Jesus washes his disciples' feet.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Genesis 25. Abraham took another wife whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Midan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah.

Jokshan fathered Sheba and Dedan. The sons of Dedan were Asherim, Latushim, and Leumim. The sons of Midian were Ephah, Ephah, Hinnok, Avidah, and Eldaiah.

All of these were the sons of Keturah. Abraham gave all he had to Isaac. But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, and while he was still living he sent them away from his son Isaac eastward to the east country.

These are the days of the years of Abraham's life, 175 years. Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron,

the son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites.

There Abraham was buried with Sarah his wife. After the death of Abraham God blessed Isaac his son, and Isaac settled at Beelahiroy. These are the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's servant, bore to Abraham.

These are the names of the sons of Ishmael, named in the order of their birth. Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael, and Kedar, Adbil, Mibsam, Mishma, Duma, Masa, Hedad, Tima, Jeter, Naphish, and Kedama. These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names by their villages and by their encampments, twelve princes according to their tribes.

These are the years of the life of Ishmael, 137 years. He breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people. They settled from Havala to Shur, which is opposite Egypt in the direction of Assyria.

He settled over against all his kinsmen. These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son. Abraham fathered Isaac and Isaac was 40 years old when he took Rebekah, the son of Bethuel, the Aramean of Paddan Amram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife.

And Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife because she was barren. And the Lord granted his prayer and Rebekah his wife conceived. The children struggled together within her and she said, If it is thus, why is this happening to me? So she went to inquire of the Lord and the Lord said to her, Two nations are in your womb and two peoples from within you shall be divided.

The one shall be stronger than the other. The older shall serve the younger. When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb.

The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau. Afterwards, his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was 60 years old when she bore them.

When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. Once, when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field and he was exhausted.

And Esau said to Jacob, Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted. Therefore, his name was called Edom. Jacob said, Sell me your birthright now.

Esau said, I am about to die, of what use is a birthright to me? Jacob said, Swear to me now. So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way.

Thus Esau despised his birthright. In Genesis chapter 25, we read of the death of Abraham. After the death of Sarah, his wife, Abraham had taken a concubine, Keturah, and through Keturah had a number of children.

Children who among them included Midian, the ancestor of the Midianites. The Midianites are important characters elsewhere in scripture. Moses takes refuge with the Midianites when he leaves Egypt and spends his time with Jethro, the priest of the Midianites.

In the book of Judges, we meet Jael, who is a Kenite, which is presumably a Midianite group. At other points, we see the Ishmaelites and the descendants of Keturah associated with each other. For instance, in chapter 37 of Genesis, where the Midianites and the Ishmaelites are both involved in taking Joseph down to Egypt.

Isaac is the sole heir, the one who bears the destiny of the covenant though. And while these groups may come into the orbit of the narrative of scripture, they are not the central stage characters that Isaac and his seed will be. Abraham dies at the age of 175.

And why do we pay attention to the numbers in scripture? Well, because sometimes they have interesting details. 175 is 7 times 5 squared. Now, that's not especially interesting, but it becomes interesting when you consider that Isaac's death is at 180, which is 5 times 6 squared.

Jacob dies at 147, which is 3 times 7 squared. And then Joseph dies at 110, which is 5 squared plus 6 squared plus 7 squared. So these numbers connect characters together, and so we should pay attention to them.

Ishmael and Isaac seem to be joined together in the burial of their father. And Isaac ends up settling at Beelahairoi, which was associated with Ishmael and Hagar in chapter 16. Ishmael here is associated with princes, much as Esau is associated with chiefs and kings in chapter 36.

There are 12 children of Nahor in chapter 22, and now the descendants of Ishmael include 12 princes. In these stories, we're seeing that other parts of the godly line, or other associated families, are reaching this 12 before Israel. They're reaching also the state of kingdom and rule.

Whether it is Abraham's brother or his son who is not of the promised seed, we see people arriving at this state of maturity before the true seed. We might then wonder why it is taking so long for the 12 tribes of Israel to come. The story of Rebekah is another story of a barren woman.

We've already had the story of Sarah, whose womb was opened. But now there is another barren woman within the promised line. It seems as if the promised line is struggling to bring forth children, and also struggling to reach those landmarks that lie

ahead of them.

The landmarks of 12 tribes, the landmarks of kingdom, all these sorts of things. Everyone else seems to be going out ahead of them and beating them to that mark. They seem to be far more fertile, they seem to be far more successful in these respects.

But yet the focus here is upon God who gives the seed. It may only be one child of Abraham, but from that child a great nation will be raised up. The womb is opened through Isaac's intercession.

He seems to be playing something of a role of a prophet, prophetically interceding for someone in need, much as we see the story of Abraham earlier on, as he intercedes for Abimelech's house, and then intercedes for Pharaoh, and intercedes for Sodom. The character of the twins is also something that has been debated. Are they identical twins? Now this might seem a strange thing to say, as they appear very different when they're born.

Yet some have suggested that since Jacob comes out holding his brother's heel, they might actually be in the same amniotic sac. Why do they come out looking different? Some have suggested, again, that there's a twin-to-twin transfusion syndrome here. So one comes out pale and sallow and the other comes out far more red.

There's a significant pairing here, again. As we go through the story of Genesis, we'll often see diptychs, two frames held alongside each other, whether that's Cain and Abel, or later Cain and Seth, or we see characters such as Lamech and Lamech, or the characters of Abraham and Lot, or Ishmael and Isaac. Here we have a further two characters that are set alongside each other, Esau and Jacob.

And going through this chapter, we'll see that this has already been set up from birth. These two characters are at odds with each other, in tension with each other, wrestling within the womb. And the events of the womb cast a deep shadow over everything that follows.

Two key issues hang over Jacob's life in all that follows, one having to do with his name and the other having to do with the blessing. And both of these begin in this story. The story of the name is set off by the fact that Jacob is given a rather unflattering name at the beginning.

The name itself may have been given to him by his father alone, not by his mother. As in the case of Esau, both parents are involved in naming the child. But in the case of Jacob, it is not necessarily the case.

The two characters appear very different. One is very red and hairy, and the other is smooth, and a man who seems to be cunning and shrewd. He's like the serpent who takes the heel.

He's the one who takes and usurps, and later on we'll see these things playing out in his story. Esau is a skilful hunter. He's a man of the field.

But Jacob is a man who dwells in tents, a man who will end up being associated with keeping sheep. Think again. These are parallels, perhaps, with the man of the field, Cain, and the man of tents, Abel.

Isaac, however, loves Esau because of his game. But Rebecca loves Jacob, so there's a tension here between the two parents. And the story of the stew incident is a very important one that plays out in different ways in what follows.

Esau says to Jacob that he wants some of the stew that he's cooking, the red, red stuff, literally. And that red, red stuff, does he think it's blood? Some have suggested it is, in his understanding, blood. And so it would be forbidden food.

He wants some of the forbidden food. And Jacob quite willingly plays the part of the serpent, the one who deceives him to take the forbidden food, and to lose his birthright as a result. As Adam lost the birthright in the Garden of Eden, so Esau loses his birthright as a result of this.

He's immediately afterwards called Edom. Edom, as a name, reminds us of Adam. The names are very similar.

And that connection with Edom and the colour red is also important. He wants the red stew, therefore he's called Red. In the story of Laban, Laban's name is associated with white, and he's deceived with white strips taken from the white tree to reveal white beneath.

And so the colours are an important part of this story too. Esau despises his birthright. He takes the food and then immediately goes his way.

He's not at the point of death. He suggests he is, but he is not actually at the point of death. In fact, what he does is despise the covenant.

And as we go through the story of Esau, we'll see how often he does not take the covenant seriously. So it's a good thing that it passes into the hands of Jacob. And Jacob's shrewdness at this point should not necessarily be condemned as an action of wicked deception.

He may be trying to save the covenant and the destiny of Abraham's promise from the hands of Esau, who would despise it. One final question to reflect upon. In the story of Esau and Jacob, Esau is described as hairy.

He's associated with goats. And these are all plays upon the name of Seir, which is the land where he finally ends up. We also see plays upon the colour red.

And there are other things that are worth noting about the character and the way he's described for us. He's described as ruddy. There is one other character in Scripture who's called ruddy.

What character is that? And what could a comparison between Esau and this character teach us about both of them? John chapter 13. Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper.

He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, Lord, do you wash my feet? Jesus answered him, What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.

Peter said to him, You shall never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I do not wash you, you have no share with me. Simon Peter said to him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.

Jesus said to him, The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean, and you are clean, but not every one of you. For he knew who was to betray him, and that was why he said, Not all of you are clean. When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me teacher and lord, and you are right, for so I am.

If I then, your lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. I am not speaking of all of you, I know whom I have chosen. But the scripture will be fulfilled, He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.

I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send, receives me, and whoever receives me, receives the one who sent me. After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.

The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus' side. So Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking.

So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, Lord, who is it? Jesus answered, It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it. So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him.

Jesus said to him, What you are going to do, do quickly. Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the money bag, Jesus was telling him, buy what we need for the feast, or that he should give something to the poor.

So after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out, and it was night. When he had gone out, Jesus said, Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once.

Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, where I am going, you cannot come. A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another.

Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. Simon Peter said to him, Lord, where are you going? Jesus answered him, Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.

Peter said to him, Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you. Jesus answered, Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times. John chapter 13 is a very important chapter that helps us to understand the meaning of Christ's death.

We should begin by noticing the similarities between John chapter 12 verses 1-8 and 13-11. There is a meal before the Passover, there is washing feet, there is a reference to coming death. And in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus performs an action symbolising his death in the Passover meal, instituting the Lord's Supper.

But here Jesus performs a different symbolic action with a similar purpose. We might ask why John omits any reference to the institution of the Supper. And why does his chronology seem to place the Last Supper before the celebration of the Passover as well? Perhaps because John wishes to present Jesus as the Passover Lamb.

We see this in chapter 1 verses 29 and 36 and also in chapter 19 verse 36. Luke is all about meals and eating, but John has focused upon water and washing. It is not entirely surprising then that the symbol of Christ's death here is a washing action rather than a

meal.

Verses 1-3 present us with a situation within which all the key details have been aligned and the scene is fully set for what takes place next. Before the feast of the Passover, Jesus knows that his hour has come. We have seen this in the previous chapter with the reference to the Greeks coming and now that is a sign that the hour has come.

He is going to depart out of this world to the Father. He has loved his own who are in the world, loving them to the end. It is during the Supper that the devil has put into the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray him.

And he knows that the Father has given all things into his hands, that he has come from God and is going to God. All of the pieces are now in play. And now Jesus gets up.

He takes a towel, he washes his disciples' feet and dries them with the towel. And the deliberate manner in which the action is entered into underlines its significance. The more that Jesus is exalted, the more he stoops to serve his people.

And the first thing that Jesus does when he knows that the Father has given all things into his hands is to take those hands and use them to wash his disciples' feet. The costliness of the liquid is stressed in chapter 12 verse 3. And Jesus' washing is achieved with a far more costly liquid, with his blood. The foot washing ultimately points to what Jesus is going to do in his death.

It is a sign of Jesus' love for his disciples. He loved them to the end and of his provision for them. He removes his garments as they will be removed at his crucifixion, wrapping himself in a linen towel as he will be wrapped in linen cloths at his burial.

He lays down his life in order to take it up again. And here he lays aside his garments in order to take them up again. The disciples are reclining to eat and their feet would have been outside of the sphere of conversation and fellowship.

Once again, the disciples would only fully understand the meaning of Jesus' action at a later point when they saw what he did in the cross and resurrection. The washing is absolutely essential. Without Jesus' act of service, we would have no part in him.

And Peter's objection is in some ways parallel to Judas' objection in the previous chapter. Judas objected to the costliness of the liquid that was poured upon the feet and presented this argument that seemed very pious that it should be given to the poor. Peter's objection is an objection to the symbolic action displaying the necessary work of Christ.

Why should my master, the one who is so much greater than me, engage in this action for me? Judas is headed for betrayal, Peter is headed for denial. And both of their forms of resistance are resisting something that needs to be done. What should we make of

verse 10 where Jesus says the one who is bathed does not need to wash except for his feet but is completely clean? Perhaps it should be taken as a reference to baptism and all it stands for.

The feet are the part of the body that come into direct contact with the judgment bearing dust. And the foot washing is more akin perhaps to the forgiveness of sins over the course of the Christian life as we continually return to our first washing. It isn't just a symbol of Christ's death though.

It's a model to follow. This is the form that our life should take together with others. It's the way that we should follow the example of Christ in setting aside our primacy and putting others before ourselves.

Jesus quotes Psalm 41 verse 9 in speaking of Judas. And the Psalm itself has interesting resonances perhaps. The opening statement, blessed is he who considers the poor, reminds us of Judas' false concern for the poor in the previous chapter.

The Psalm then speaks of enemies saying of David that he is lying down never to rise up in the previous verse. David prays that God would raise him up in verse 10. And all of these themes seem to be fulfilled in Christ's death and resurrection.

In verse 23 the beloved disciple is described as lying in Jesus' bosom. This should remind us of the word being in the bosom of the Father in verse 18 of chapter 1. In both cases we see that a witness is qualified for their witness bearing by virtue of their extremely close relationship with the one to whom they bear witness. In verse 2 we see that Satan has put the plan to betray Christ in the heart of Judas.

And then he enters into Judas personally in verse 27. This occurs after Jesus gives him the morsel. That morsel is something that again might draw to mind what Paul says in Romans.

If your enemy is hungry, give him a morsel to eat. Jesus gives a morsel to his enemy here. And after he is given that morsel, Satan enters into Judas and he goes out.

The words that follow are incredibly powerful and express something of the ability of the gospel writers in scene setting. With the very smallest details they can establish the emotional tone and force of a scene. And it was night.

And that is something that you'll see throughout the scripture. Those slight details of time, the rising of the sun, the setting of the sun, the particular time of the day or the setting in which something occurred. These details are not accidental and they often convey something of the force of the text itself.

So pay attention to them and think about them. The end of this chapter refers to the new commandment that Jesus gives to his disciples. Love one another just as I have loved

you.

You also are to love one another. He gave the example of love, playing out that sacrificial action that he would perform on the cross in washing his disciples' feet and drying them. That is the example that we should follow.

And it will be the means by which people know that we are his disciples. It should mark us out. It should help us to be recognised as the true disciples of Christ.

A question to conclude with. This new commandment that Christ gives is explored in great detail within the first epistle of John. And I would like for you to spend some time reflecting upon the ways in which the first epistle of John takes up and unpacks this particular statement of Christ.