

There are many benefits to being a lectionary-based church: the lectionary keeps the preacher from only preaching what he or she feels like; and, it is really cool to know that Anglicans, Catholics and Lutherans around the world, are all reading the same lessons that we are. One of the down-falls of the lectionary however, is that some important stories, verses, and concepts get left out of our Sunday readings. This is quite true in this week's reading. As I was preparing for my sermon, I was having a hard time discerning what to say about our Genesis reading today. Then I realized that last week's lesson from Genesis chapter 22, stopped at verse 14, leaving out one of the most important verses in the entire bible. Let's pick up where we left off last week; for those who were not here or need a refresher, we read the story of Abraham almost sacrificing his only son, Isaac, in obedience to God's command. This was difficult to read at first, but we learned that God never intended to let Abraham kill his only son. Rather, God, in his faithfulness, provided a ram at the last minute. And that's where we left off. The next verse, Genesis 22:15 says this, "<sup>15</sup> And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven <sup>16</sup> and said, 'By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, <sup>17</sup> I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, <sup>18</sup> and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.'" The key verse that I would like us to notice is the one I just read: "In your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." God tells Abraham that He is going to bless him for his obedience, and that Abraham's offspring will number that of the stars. This is the same promise that God made to Abraham in chapter 15. In making God's covenant with Abraham, Genesis states, "Then the word of the Lord came to him: 'This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body (Isaac) will be your heir.'" He took him outside and said, 'Look up at the heavens and count the stars---if indeed you can count them.'" Then he said to him, "'So shall your offspring be.'" There are over 8,000 stars that can be seen by the naked eye, not to mention those that can't. If you remember last week's sermon about the sacrifice of Isaac, you can see how much of an actual sacrifice God was asking Abraham to make. Isaac was the offspring that proved that God was in covenant with Abraham. This covenant God makes with Abraham is of the utmost importance. It was a covenant initiated by God, for Abraham, and for all of his offspring. We are told that Abraham's offspring, are to benefit from the covenant God makes with him. It might be helpful to talk a little bit about the biblical notion of "covenants." In the Old Testament, a covenant is a pact of mutuality concerning individuals. A covenant could also be imposed by a greater power upon a lesser one, the greater power demands loyalty, and obligates itself to the protection of the lesser one. For example, God's covenant with the Israelites. The vast majority of the references to covenant in the bible are such treaties. The covenant made with Abraham was motivated by love and mercy. God offers His protection to Abraham and his descendants, not because of anything they have done, but purely by His grace and Love. God chose to bless Abraham, because God wanted to bless Abraham. Two weeks ago we talked about how God is able to do whatever God wants, because God is not bound to the same limits of finitude that people are. God wanted to be in a covenantal relationship with Abraham, and so he put into place the stipulations of the covenant. The only thing God asked of Abraham and his descendants, was to have faith in God. As long as the people have faith in God, He will continue in that covenantal relationship with His people.

But the covenant with Abraham did not stop with him. As we are told in the New Testament, the covenant God made with Abraham is still being enjoyed by us today. In the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews, the author writes, (11:8-12). And in his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul writes, (3:23-29). What an amazing concept! The very covenant that God made with Abraham, a few thousand years ago or so, is still being fulfilled with us today. This brings us to our reading for today. The story of Isaac seeking out, and choosing, Rebekah, shows the faithfulness of God in fulfilling His promises. The relationship that is made possible because of creation, as we discussed two weeks ago, takes its first solid step in the wedding of Isaac and Rebekah. The next step is the birth of Jacob and Esau, as we will see next week. So the question becomes: what does this mean for us? We can get a better idea by looking at the details of the characters involved. First, you have Isaac's servant. This young man, in his obedience to his master, goes out to find him a suitable partner. Interestingly, the servant sort of plays a game with God -- a game I have certainly been guilty of. The, God-if-you-do-such-a-thing-as-a-sign-then-I-will-know-it-is-your-will-game. God, if the Mets win, then I will know that I am supposed to buy a ferrari. No worries Jen, that ain't happening anytime soon. It's amazing to me that even though the servant required of God such a silly thing, God was willing to entertain his request. I don't think we should read into this that we should model the servant's behavior. However, what it does tell us, is that God is faithful even when we make silly suggestions or requests of Him. Another thing to notice as my wife pointed out to me in conversation, is that the sign the servant requested was one that would show the possible mate as gracious, which Rebekah was with the water she drew. She agreed to the servant's request, and then offered even more -- water for his camels. The servant very easily could have asked for a sign like the woman being wealthy and gorgeous. But no, he wanted to know who to choose, by whether she was caring and unselfish. When we are trying to make important decisions in our lives, are we seeking those that are virtuous and will bring God honor? When we are in a covenantal relationship with the Living God, we should be asking that God lead us in a direction that would give Him the Glory, and that which would be best for us. Another important element of the narrative is that the servant actually gives Rebekah a choice. It is very easy sometimes to look to the bible as treating women as lesser citizens, and in favor of patrimony; but this situation shows the woman being empowered to make her own decision. When we are pursuing the will of God, we must trust that others around us have the ability to know the will of God just as we do. But, once we have made a decision in faith, we must than be willing to be obedient to God. Finally, there are the actions of Rebekah. She was open to whatever crazy idea God might have for her life, because she was a person of faith. Sometimes God is going to suggest something for our lives that seems a little odd; but when we have intimacy with God, and are in a covenantal relationship with God, we become more willing to do some of the "crazy" things He asks of us. And, when we do these different things, than God can continue to use us, so that our offspring might too be uncountable as the stars. Amen.