

## Sermon Text for February 14, 2016

*by Rev. Robert K. Bronkema*

Romans 12:1-2, Genesis 26:12-22

### **“How can we be transformed without being conformed?”**

If you are into historical fiction I would highly recommend James Michener. I’ve read his book *The Source* a few times. This book is about a group of archeologists on a dig and their unearthing of one civilization after another. As they unveil one layer after another the main archeologist makes up what it must have been like for the people living those thousands of years before.

There is a common thread throughout the book. You see a family that has made it through all of these thousands of years struggle with their society. It is a battle to not conform to their culture whether it is religiously as they ardently worship YHWH the Jewish God as opposed to their neighbors who worship the idols that they can find, or to decide to physically move away from culture and out of the literal cave and into the first house. From the beginning of time we struggle with living in a world which tries to draw us into it with all of its attractions as opposed to being drawn to God while we live in this world. As Christians in this day and age we struggle to find the balance in our lives with our responsibilities in the world and our devotion to Christ.

Today we will be taking a step back in Scripture as we skip over for a chapter the continuing feud between Esau and Jacob and now we turn to their father Issac. This is the only complete chapter in Scripture that deals solely with Isaac. We find him struggling to maintain his identity as a man of faith, while at the same time maintaining his worldly possessions. His struggle to live faithfully while trying to be successful in this world is a similar one that we all feel and that Paul faces when he tells us not to be conformed to this world but rather to be transformed by the power of Jesus Christ. Basically how do we live in this world and yet not be of this world. Isaac will give us an insight as to how he did it, and hopefully we will be able to follow his example.

### **READ**

We begin in the first verses of our Scripture describing Isaac as a very successful businessman. He knew how to invest by sowing and then reaping a hundredfold. Amazing being able to double your output and your profit in a single year. And things only get better from there. Scripture states that the Lord blessed him but he also had to know something about the way that the world worked in order to do so well in the world as he did. Scripture repeats over and over again how wealthy he was and how successful he had become. Here is somebody who had been called by God 20 years before he was

born to lead the people of God and so had a very firm, solid relationship with God. Yet he is also somebody who knew how to affirm the world, live in the world and make it good and yet at the same time recognized that his primary responsibility was to remain faithful to God. He is, and we will see how in the Scripture to come, a good example of someone who is able to hold together a profound faith and a significant worldly experience.

It is said that theologians or pastors live in their own universe. I guess you need to be a little naive and certainly a lot optimistic in order to be a pastor. You need to believe that no matter what happens God is greater and that good can come out of any situation. So because of that it might just happen that pastors miss some of the daily financial, physical, and spiritual struggles that everyday people go through. I think that is fair and I realized it when a good friend of mine relayed to me what it takes to make it up the corporate ladder in most big companies. He said that a supervisor once told him that if he didn't go out with the boss and some of the guys and take part in post work activities that would put any Christians in crisis then his chances of getting a promotion would be hampered. It was right around that time that he decided to go into the ministry. I've ministered to diplomats who every single year are pressured to rise up the ladder and if they don't get a promotion, then they lose their jobs. I can't understand that world.

We do find ourselves like Isaac, especially if we are good at what we do, pressured to fall in line with and conform to what the world would have us to do. And in all honesty it is easier to conform to the world than it is to change or transform the world because as Paul states we have been transformed through Christ. So as a missionary kid reading that Isaac was very wealthy and at the same time that he is chosen by God to carry on his message even in the midst of his wealth it was difficult for me to put that together. There was a day when I thought that wealth in and of itself was evil. But rather now the perspective is not necessarily sell all you have and give to the poor as Christ states but rather make sure that you are placing everything that you have in the service of Christ. There is a big difference, and I think the difference is that between completely separating yourself from the world and living in the world in a balance with your faith and the world.

Our Scripture moves now from describing the wealth of Isaac which gets him into trouble with the local community. He was so wealthy that he was considered a threat and asked to leave the area. It sounds like he was considered a monopoly and asked to go to a different place in the hopes that he would break up and that his flocks and family would split up. But instead from this command to leave we find the focus now upon those wells that we talked about a few weeks back. Remember those wells that we mentioned were

the meeting places for the people of that area. Well those wells were not only meeting places but they were the source of the most important commodity of that time: water.

I learned a lot about wells and aquifers from my time living in Florida. A number of our members worked for the St. John's River Water Management. Most of us living in Florida had our own wells.

It is thought that Abraham when he is told to leave his country in Mesopotamia he had learned how to dig wells and even more importantly how to find them from the Mesopotamians who were experts in this. When he went into Canaan that is not only a land of milk and honey but also the land of deserts and mountainous arid terrain he took this skill with him. One of the reasons that he and Isaac became so wealthy was that as nomads in the desert they knew how to find and build wells so that they could constantly go to the waters and be replenished and continue to live.

Our next Scripture tells us of a conflict between Isaac and the Philistines, the people of that land who did not know how to dig wells. They were so threatened by Isaac that they had filled in all the wells that his father Abraham had dug. We find Isaac in these verses unearthing and redigging, going back down to the original life giving water that his father had at one time enjoyed.

What a great image of the world coming along and filling in those wells that are so important to us, those wells that contain the water, our sustenance from the beginning of time and making us not dig new wells that might take us to dry land but rather digging back up the old wells where we know the water, the living water can be found.

This is what Isaac is doing in these verses. It struck me that this is where we find ourselves now as well. As we go through our lives trying desperately like Isaac to live in a harmonious relationship between what the world requires and what God requires the world will try, always try to cover up our source of life, the place where we go to be filled. Isaac when he is in need, when the world is crowding him out and forcing him to pick up and go decided to go back to the foundation, go back to where his father, his ancestors had gone and had been successful. When the church faces questions and challenges from the world and struggles to come up with answers the worst thing it can do is to allow the world to fill up our wells. The worst thing that could happen is that we abandon the traditional, tried and tested wells where we know the water of truth and life are found. The worst thing that we could do is start looking for answers apart from those things which we call fundamental.

What are the wells, the foundations that our forefathers and mothers handed on to us that we too can claim and call fundamental to our existence. There are not many, here Abraham digs three wells, two are claimed by the world and the third he keeps. The

three foundations for us as a church are 1) Scripture. We can not lose this foundational authority as some may see it as nothing more than an inspirational book. This is the Word of God, that's what Calvin one of our forefathers called it. It contains the inerrant truths about Jesus Christ and his salvific work for us.

2) The church as the body of Christ is another foundational piece to our attempt and our ability to not allow the world to conform us but rather to stay with Christ.

3) A third is the Word of God incarnate which is Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. He who tells the Samaritan woman that if she drinks from the water that he offers she will never be thirsty.

Isaac was able to give up two of his wells because he knew that there were many other wells that his father Abraham had dug that he could find. He didn't start from scratch and try to create his own well that would have inevitably led him to a futile endeavor.

When I was at Princeton right in the middle of my ordination exams I remember vividly in the library and after hours of studying arriving at that point where your brain gets fried so you start wandering around the library in a daze trying to get back into the study mode. As I was in one of those dazes I went to the card catalog and looked up my last name just for fun. They had my grandfather's doctoral dissertation on file so I looked it up. It was on Emil Brunner's use of light and darkness and its relevance to the Gospel of John. I didn't understand a word of what he was saying, he was the smart end of my family, but I couldn't put it down. I felt like I was delving deeper and deeper into who I was. When I finished and as I walked out of that library I recognized what a wealth of resources and how privileged I was to have a grandfather who taught as a Presbyterian Pastor at Princeton, had a father who was a missionary and top of his class at Princeton and I could ride their coattails for as far as I could.

But like Isaac I was able to uncover, unearth the wells that they had dug, the research that they had done and guess what I found at the bottom. The living water of Jesus Christ was their foundation and their sole reason for being. This was what kept them going as the world tried to keep them parched and without spiritual sustenance.

Brothers and sisters keep going to the well. If the world tries to fill up your access to Scripture, or to fellowship and study within the church, or your personal relationship with Jesus Christ, don't try to dig another well. Don't look elsewhere to find the living waters because there is only one place to find it.

We live in a time when we need to go back to the fundamentals of our faith. There are so many other side issues besides these three that people try to distract us with so that we can't get the job done of making disciples for Christ in the church. But I want

to leave you with the words that Isaac leaves us with in verse 22. When he finally redigs another of his father's wells and nobody contends with it he calls it: Broad place or room. Now the Lord has made room for us all, and we shall be fruitful in the land. You will see that the more you go to the well, the more you rely upon the faith and the Word that those before us have paved then the more room we will have to worship and adore the Christ. The more we go to the well the more we will be transformed and the less room we will have to be conformed to this world. Amen.