

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 21, 2008, at Temple Israel, dedicated to the ministry of Rabbi Misha Zinkow, Senior Rabbi of Temple Israel, and also to Charlie Knerr on her birthday, and always to the glory of God!

“Family in Transitional Times”

Genesis 23:1-25:18

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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This Sabbath’s Torah portion speaks of a family and a nation in major generational transition. Genesis 23 begins with Sarah’s death and Genesis 25 ends with Abraham’s. In between, Genesis 24 delivers a long narrative on Abraham’s unnamed servant finding a wife named Rebekah for Isaac.

Here is recorded the first death and burial in the history of the people of Israel. Here the cave of Machpelah is the first (and only) parcel of real estate acquired by Abraham, the father of the nation in this long promised land. Here, a matchmaking servant weaves his magic in the house of Laban. Here, the patriarch of both of our faith traditions is laid to rest, as his sons Ishmael and Isaac are reunited long enough to bury their father beside his beloved Sarah in the cave that is their only true home in Canaan. Here, this powerful passage of scripture shows the dying of one generation and the raising up of the next.

Let’s look a little closer at this family and nation in transition.

This passage opens immediately after the *Akedah* in Genesis 22. Although the Torah does not make the connection, rabbis and sages have wondered if Sarah dies of shock because Abraham was preparing to slay their son without informing her, or because of the alarming news of Isaac's near death. According to one legend, Sarah is told that Abraham has killed their only son at God's command and she dies on the spot. One commentator sees Sarah's death, even after learning that Isaac has survived, as an inability to live in a world as dangerous and unreliable as she has found the world to be, a world where life hangs by such a fragile thread (Zomberg).

Whatever the cause of death, the one who lied to protect Abraham (12:10-20), mocked at the promise (19:8-15), and laughed at the thought of birthing a child when more than 80 years old (21:6), is now in need of a grave. There is no longer laughter in the land, for Sarah – “the princess” – has died.

With the death of Sarah, Abraham, who is referred to in the passage as “the prince of God” (the “landless” prince) carries out a commercial transaction of a grave site purchase. Nowhere is God mentioned in the midst of this transaction. Paradoxically, with this small tract of land – for which he pays full price – Abraham has secured his place. Abraham finally has possessed the land, at least a small part of it. Nowhere else in scripture does a land purchase take on such significance nor occupy so much textual space. While Jeremiah 32:15 speaks of the theological implications of establishing fields and vineyards in the land following exile, this passage is all about property. It is not about theology. But real estate never seemed so real to “the people of promise” than in Genesis 23.

With Sarah buried, Abraham turns his attention to his unmarried son, Isaac. The tone and style of the text change dramatically as God re-enters the language and the process of promise. It is “Yahweh, the God Heaven” who guides this search for a spouse. A prayer for guidance at the beginning and then a doxology of celebration at the end show “*hesed*,” or “the steadfast loyalty” of

Yahweh.

Throughout, it is Yahweh's blessing, Yahweh's prosperity, Yahweh's fidelity and Yahweh's leadership that guides this narrative. Lightness and joy re-enter Genesis as Rebekah receives the same kind of blessing that God bestowed upon Abraham after the *Akedah* and she returns to the "tent of Sarah." There, with Isaac, she returns love, comfort, and hope to the family still struggling with grief. With the arrival of Rebekah in "Sarah's tent," the story of Isaac and Rebekah moves to center stage and the star of Abraham fades into the background.

In Genesis 25, little more is heard from Abraham in the final 35 years of his life, other than his bearing six more children with Keturah, who is referred to as his wife and concubine. But, when Abraham dies, he does so in the company of hope. At his death, Abraham's lineage seems secure as he lives to see his twin grandsons, Jacob and Esau, reach the age of 50.

He dies surrounded by the generations and he is buried by the son of right (Ishmael) and the son of promise (Isaac). While tension surrounds Abraham's burial, in the end, Isaac and Ishmael stand together to bury their father. The burial of the mother, the marriage of the son, the burial of the father – the family of the patriarch is in transition.

All of us can relate to this story. Many of us have grieved the passing of our family's matriarchs and patriarchs. We have witnessed the surprising twists and turns of our families in generational transitions.

This story is particularly meaningful to me and to my family of faith. On the walls of First Congregational Church in downtown Columbus, two 16th century Dutch tapestries – one of Genesis 23, "The purchase of Sarah's tomb," and Genesis 24, "Sending the servant to find a wife for Isaac" – are 430-year-old witnesses to our family of faith that this story shapes all our lives. This story is for all faiths and

all families in all generations.

Thanksgiving will be here before the next Sabbath. We will travel to family and family will come to us in the week ahead. The board will be spread with wondrous foods from a multiplicity of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, including some family favorites passed on for generations. Food, fellowship and fun will mark our time together.

By sunset next Friday, many of us will have stories to tell of siblings who outdid themselves with outrageous behavior – again, crazy uncles and aunts, wild cousins and kids and the “Elijahs” who appeared at our Thanksgiving tables unexpectedly. Some of us will lament the empty chairs which signify a loved one missing this year, whose passing to eternity means the generations are passing as well.

With a record number of Americans out of work, some of our family members will come to the table unemployed or struggling with underemployment. At some of our tables children will announce they are getting married or being joined in covenant union (whatever happened to asking the fathers’ permission?!). Others of us will hear news that babies are on the way (hopefully in that order). Some will be shaken by news of cancer or life threatening diseases, and others will look across the table into the eyes of parents whose aging has worn them down a bit more in the year now ending. For some, prayers of thanksgiving to God will be cast in silence as words fail to grasp the challenge, the gratitude or the beauty of the moment.

Just like mashed potatoes and turkey, at Thanksgiving we come to expect the delight and the neuroses of our families. Some of our familial neuroses are the stuff of legends. Unless we are simply in denial, all of us must admit, “the family” is certainly a neurotic institution. But, we also must admit that “the family” is the best neurotic institution we have!

It is in the family that we often weather the best and worst transitions of our lives. After all, the definition of transition is “the psychological acceptance of change.” It is never change that does us

in. It is the transitions – our acceptance of change or lack thereof – that throttles our lives.

How many times have we found ourselves struggling to understand our lives in the heart of the family? My guess is this happens for most of us on many of the days of our lives.

From Abraham's family we learn lessons for our families and our nation. We learn that from generation to generation, God reigns in the heart of our families. We learn that our place in the land is often secured when we purchase a plot in which to lay our beloved to rest. Such a place exists for my family and I imagine it does for yours as well. The places where the bones of our beloved lie are sacred to us and to all our families for generations.

We learn that out of the ashes of despair often rises the Phoenix of hope. Out of the empty of tent of Sarah, comes the blessing of Esau and Jacob born in Isaac and Rebekah's love.

We learn that funerals and the loss of patriarchs can unify brothers and sisters separated by divisions which they or others created. We learn that the promises of God are delivered at unexpected times to expectant people.

We are astounded that caves and tents become the places where generational transitions shift and "tipping points" in human history occur.

As our nation faces transitions economically and politically in the days ahead, I pray that we may we learn to trust the heart and spirit of God, who guides our matriarchs and patriarchs, to trust and follow servant leaders, who are blessed by God to carry dreams and hopes into uncharted territory, and to believe that the faith of our fathers and mothers – the faith of Sarah and Abraham, of Isaac and Rebekah – will live and breathe in each of us, and in the generations to come. Amen.

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