

In the Midst of Mine Enemies

How do we behave when we find ourselves in the midst of our enemies? Psalm 23, which is often cited as the most beloved passage of Scripture in the Bible, suggests that, for those who love God, such a position is not a problem. For the Psalmist, sitting down to a table prepared in the midst of enemies is as of little concern as walking through the valley of the shadow of death, which is to say, none at all. For such a one it is a piece with having one's head anointed and one's cup full to overflowing with blessing. In all situations, the faithful one trusts God and finds reason to praise. But how do we, 21st century residents of the mightiest nation on earth respond to such a situation? Is our confidence in God or somewhere else?

Once again, this morning, I'm following the readings suggested by the authors of the book, Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals. For February 7, they have paired an unusual story about one of the great patriarchs of Israel with notes about a modern Brazilian bishop, Dom Hélder Câmara, today being the anniversary of the latter's birth. What connection does Isaac have with the so-called "Bishop of the slums?" And how do lessons from their stories illuminate choices that we have made as a nation and individually? We'll consider those things and end, as we do on the first Sunday each month, with our commemoration of Jesus' final Passover meal with his disciples in Jerusalem, a table prepared for him in the midst of friends but including those who betrayed, denied, and abandoned him.

Let's start with the story about Isaac, which I read just a moment ago. I invite you to think for a moment about the stories we generally hear about the second of the three great forebears of the Jews. If we were in a room together, I might poll you about what those are. I suspect you'd list the announcement of his impending birth to his incredulous parents, Abraham and Sarah. Maybe you'd remember that it was an undefined incident between young Isaac and his elder half-brother, Ishmael, that caused the latter and his mother, Hagar, to be ejected from Abraham's camp into the desert. You'd likely remember how Abraham nearly sacrificed his long-awaited heir on Mount Moriah. You might have a hard time remembering how Isaac ended up married to his cousin, Rebekah, because Isaac barely figures in that story. But you'd certainly remember how the elderly Isaac was tricked by Rebekah and their youngest son, Jacob.

As a result of those stories, you might think of Isaac as the "passive patriarch." In nearly all the stories about him, he is acted on rather than acting. Except here in Genesis 26, when he takes the initiative to protect his family and his livelihood, first against a natural disaster and then against the enmity of his neighbors. It turns out that Isaac is a model of positive action for us, after all.

The story opens with a famine in the Promised Land, the natural disaster to which I referred. As his father, Abraham, had done before him, Isaac takes his household and his flocks and moves south to the land of Gerar, ruled by a king called Abimelech. I say "called" rather than "named" because the king in Gerar during the time of Isaac's father had also been called Abimelech, so it's likely a ceremonial title, rather than a common name unless the royal family of Gerar was as fond of the name Abimelech as the French later were of Louis. At this point, God warns Isaac in a dream not to continue down to Egypt as his father did and as his son would do later at a time of famine. Isaac heeds the dream; indeed, he never in his life leaves the Land of Promise. In his commentary on Genesis for the Baker Commentary series, John Goldengay notes, "He lived, in fact, on the borderland of the two peoples (Edom and Israel), who afterwards boasted their descent from him."

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For those of you wondering what happened in the bit of this chapter that I omitted from my reading, Isaac also follows in the footsteps of Abraham by trying to pass off his beautiful wife as his sister, not a very edifying episode but one that might make an interesting sermon when combined with the two incidents in which Abraham claimed Sarah as his sister. Such a sermon could be an interesting critique of the nature of patriarchy... maybe I'll leave the topic for Pastor Denise or Rev. Keyes or Rev. Barnes... But I digress...

More to the point is that God blesses Isaac richly for acting to flee the famine and then obeying God's directive about not going too far afield. We read in verses 12-13 that "Isaac sowed seed in that land, and in the same year reaped a hundredfold. The Lord blessed him, and the man became rich; he prospered more and more until he became very wealthy." Now this incredible return on investment would have been unusual at any time but in the midst of a famine must have seemed miraculous indeed. And, as we've experienced in recent days, those who make a killing during a time of famine, or pandemic, are not universally admired. Verse 14 tells us that "the Philistines envied him." Finally, Isaac's host, Abimelech, who's already been deceived by Isaac once in the matter of Rebekah, gives him the word: "Go away from us; you have become too powerful for us."

We don't know how the message was delivered. It may have been done politely and diplomatically, even in a friendly sort of way: "Listen, my friend, I hate to ask you this but I'm having all sorts of trouble with the people. Could you move a little further away, please?" Or it might have been a Wild West sort of message, delivered with a posse of tough guys: "This town ain't big enough for both of us, Ike." But Isaac didn't put up a fuss. He just packed up his family, rounded up the herds, gathered in his harvest, and moved down into the valley. He re-dug the wells that Abraham had dug when he was a sojourner in the same place and settled in.

But, like the blues singers, Isaac discovered that moving "way out on the outskirts of town" was not the answer to his problems. No sooner had his men dug a new well than the shepherds of Gerar confronted them and claimed that the water was theirs. Those of you who grew up in the western U.S. may remember the tales of range wars started over water – scarce in arid places like our desert plains and southern Palestine but critical to pasturing and farming. But rather than turning his herders into an army, as Abraham did, or finding a "hired gun" for his "range war," as the character "Shane" was in the movie that bears his name, Isaac merely shrugged, named the new well "Esek" ("Contention"), and moved a little further out.

But the same thing happened again. This time, Isaac called the new well "Sitnah," "Opposition," and moved again. By the way, you'll remember that Sitnah means opposition if you remember that it shares a Hebrew root with the word for opponent: Satan. Isaac leaves Sitnah to his opponents and moves still further away. When his men dig the third well, Isaac calls it "Rehoboth," "roomy," because now there is room for all. It reminds me of the old poem about Daniel Boone that I often read as a boy, in which "'Elbow room,' cried Daniel Boone," is the repeated refrain.

So, Isaac prospered and was run out of town – sadly, not an unusual fate for his descendants, either. Isaac kept the peace, moved away, and was run off again. The cycle repeated. And

while he was left in peace at Rehoboth, he eventually moved on to Beer-sheba, where he had a vision of God promising to bless him, built an altar, and dug a new well. Already, we get a sense that Isaac's strategic retreats have brought him wealth and God's blessing. Then comes the final surprise: Abimelech comes to visit him, proposing a peace treaty. "We see plainly that the Lord has been with you; so we say, let there be an oath between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you so that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the Lord."

While we sit with that story for a few minutes, let me turn to a more recent servant of God. Hélder Pessoa Câmara was born one hundred and twelve years ago today in Fortaleza, Brazil. He is almost always referred to as "Dom Hélder Câmara," but those of us who do not speak Portuguese should not be mistaken. The "Dom" is not part of his name but a title of respect, once used for Portuguese nobility, as the cognate "Don" was used in Spanish, it is still used for clergy. Formally, he is also called "Servant of God," as he is in the process of canonization in the Catholic Church – the Anglican Church of Brazil already recognizes him as a saint. Informally, he is often remembered as "the Bishop of the Slums," as he served the impoverished Brazilian archdiocese of Olinda and Recife from 1964 to 1985, during the dangerous time of the military dictatorship of Brazil. Previously, he served as the auxiliary bishop of Rio de Janeiro, a great city also known for its poverty-stricken *favelas*.

Dom Câmara was known during his life as an indefatigable champion of the poor. In 1959 he founded *Banco da Providência* in Rio, "a philanthropic organization to fight poverty and social injustice by facilitating the contraction of loans by poorer populations," not unlike the microfinance work done by our own Ryan Calkins. During the Second Vatican Council, Dom Câmara led a group of 40 bishops to create "The Pact of the Catacombs," in which, "they challenged their brother bishops to live lives of evangelical poverty: without honorific titles, privileges, and worldly ostentation." Clearly, that document continues to resonate with the life of the current Pope Francis. "Câmara followed these precepts; during his tenure as bishop he never lived in the episcopal palace, and he wore a simple brown cassock and a wooden cross in place of the formal garb and gold cross of a bishop." Dom Câmara was a leader in the Church in Brazil to non-violently resist the military dictatorship, not a stand he took without risk. More conservative Catholics urged the junta to arrest Dom Câmara for his support of land reform. For years, "he was not allowed to broadcast on radio, and no information about him was printed by any Brazilian press." His friend and colleague, Father Antônio Henrique Pereira Neto, was murdered by unknown assailants. Dom Câmara's own domicile was machine-gunned. Legendarily, a hit man was sent for Câmara himself, but when the elderly and diminutive archbishop answered his door, the would-be assassin exclaimed, "I can't kill you. You are one of the Lord's." His opponents sometimes called him "the Red Bishop," to which Dom Câmara famously responded, "When I fed the poor, they called me a saint. When I asked, 'Why are they poor?' they called me a communist."

In Isaac and in Dom Hélder Câmara, we find similar models for the life of faith. Unassuming, humble, and non-violent, even in the midst of their enemies, in the midst of cultures addicted to violence and domination, they served God as counter-cultural models and were blessed. Isaac, his troubles with his wife and his sons notwithstanding, lived a comfortable and long life. Unlike

other twentieth century models of non-violence – Mahatma Gandhi and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, – Dom Hélder Câmara lived to a ripe old age. But how do we reconcile the examples of the Bishop of the Slums and the son of Abraham with an American Christianity that takes pride in storming the U.S. Capitol and beating Capitol Police officers? What has the Prince of Peace to do with a pugnacious Christianity that takes offense at snowflakes on coffee cups and the cheerful greeting of “Happy Holidays?”

The fact of the matter, my friends, is that we, too, live in a society addicted to violence and to domination. Our national mythos of brave pioneers taming a howling wilderness feeds that addiction, from the celebration of the genocidal Christopher Columbus to the adoration of “Indian hunters” like Boone and gunfighters like Shane. Today, millions will watch the ultimate game of American football for the season, despite its warlike terminology, despite the scientific evidence which shows the dreadful toll the inherent violence of the game takes on its participants from peewee ball to the pros, despite the documented examples of the flouting of the “Rooney Rule” and the discarding of perfectly good players for their political beliefs which prove that the game, like our society, is racist to the core.

Those who insist that Donald Trump be held accountable for his “fight like hell” encouragement of the rioters in D.C. are quite right, but the problem of violence in the United States goes deep, far deeper than those horrific hours in our nation’s capitol. From the Wild West conviction that fists, or a gun can solve any problem to our police system’s origins in the militias created to drive First Nations from their land and to put down slave revolts to the shockingly permissive “Stand Your Ground” laws that sanction deadly force in the hands of untrained civilians, we have violence engrained into our national consciousness. By the way, on those “Stand Your Ground” laws, did you know that 36 of our 50 states are now “Stand Your Ground” states? 28 of those have laws stating, “that there is no duty to retreat from an attacker in any place in which one is lawfully present,” while eight others, including Washington, have judicial precedent defending the concept. Only 14 states have laws which “impose a duty to retreat when one can do so with absolute safety.” Meanwhile, “A paper from The Urban Institute which analyzed FBI data found that in stand-your-ground states, the use of the defense by whites in the shooting of a black person is found to be justifiable 17 percent of the time, while the defense when used by blacks in the shooting of a white person is successful 1 percent of the time.” The Rand Corporation has done two recent studies which found that “Stand Your Ground” laws actually increased homicides and did not deter violent crime. The “Stand Your Ground” laws, like the “War” in Edwin Starr’s 1969 counter-cultural hit song, are “friend only to the undertaker,” and, I might add, the munitions makers.

My sisters and my brothers, my siblings in Christ, we have a message among us that says “no” to the violence of our society. Jesus said, “love your enemies.” Paul wrote of God’s love for all, “while we were yet sinners – enemies of God – God proved God’s love for us in that Christ died for us.” Today, as we join together in cyberspace to do what we cannot yet do in person, we celebrate that love for us through the symbols of bread and cup, the broken body and shed blood of Jesus. We set no barriers before Christ’s table but say to all who will listen, “come. Join us in God’s love. Walk with us and make peace with us and spread God’s love throughout the world.” Our joy is not in violence or revenge but in the name of Jesus, who comforts us and blesses us,

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who fills our true longings and keeps us singing as we go. Come, let us sing and let us remember that we are pledged to the Prince of Peace.