

Finding Home  
Genesis 23  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
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Pastor Dave Carver

We've been reading about Abraham for a long time. Since January, we've walked with this man as he has heard God's promises for him and for his descendants. Specifically, he has been promised three things: 1) that he would be the father of a great nation; 2) that this nation would possess a great land; and 3) that in him, all the nations of the world would be blessed.

And we have noted how God seems to be taking his sweet time on fulfilling these promises, haven't we? After all, there's twenty-five years between the promise of a son and the birth of Isaac. God is not in a hurry.

Today's reading brings us to a point that is 37 years after the birth of Isaac – a full 63 years after the promise is given to Abraham and his wife. It's time for the second part of the promise to get some legs, and that's what chapter 23 is about.

As we begin to consider the passage at hand, I want you to open your Bibles and take a look at Genesis 23. It's from the Bible. The Word of God. And it's about the promises of God. So it's interesting to me that there's one word missing here. Do you see? The entire chapter, and someone is not even named once. Who is it? Here's a clue: three letters, starts with G and ends with D. Not a single mention of the Lord in this chapter – yet God's fingerprints are all over this text. Let's take a closer look.

Mimi has already read for you the account of Sarah's death. And here, Abraham does what you would expect him to do, and what you hope your spouse does when you die: he grieves. And then he senses that it's time to act on the second part of God's promise to him and to his family. He goes to the local council and says, "Look, I'm not from here. We know that. I'm a renter. I'm a tenant. I don't have a stake in your land. But I need one now. Will you sell me some land?" Note that when he does this, he calls himself "a stranger and a sojourner". Even though he has lived in this place for more than six decades, he's an outsider.

And look at how they respond: with flattery. "Oh, Abraham, don't be ridiculous. Go ahead down to the cemetery and bury your dead. It's on us. Feel free." At first blush, that seems generous, doesn't it? How hospitable! But look at what is really happening: they are using flattery to keep him landless. They would love for him to remain a renter forever – to keep him on the outside, looking in. As Mimi read, though, he demurs and asks again to buy some property. He even names a particular plot of ground that is not far from the place where he has pitched his tent often in the preceding years. Let's see what happens next:

*Now Ephron was sitting among the Hittites; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, of all who went in at the gate of his city, "No, my lord, hear me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it; in the presence of my people I give it to you; bury your dead." Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land. He said to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, "If you only will listen to me! I will give the price of the field; accept it from me, so that I may bury my dead there."*

Verses 10 – 13 replay the same scene, only now Abraham is negotiating with a particular individual, not a group of people. As we read through this, I want to point out to you that there are only two places in the Old Testament where a title transfer is described so carefully – here and in Jeremiah, where the prophet buys a field as a means of demonstrating God's promise to abide in

Jerusalem even during the exile. I don't think that this careful description is an accident – I think we are meant to take something from it.

After Abraham requests the property for a third time, Ephron responds:

*“My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver —what is that between you and me? Bury your dead.”*

What is four hundred shekels? Quite a bit, actually. Ephron is now teaching Abraham a lesson about “supply and demand”. A shekel is half an ounce, so we're talking here about twelve and a half pounds of silver. This is a LOT of money. Whereas he was not shy about negotiating with the Lord when it came to saving a city back in chapter 18, Abraham does not waste any time negotiating with Ephron about this purchase:

*Abraham agreed with Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants.*

*So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area, passed to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, in the presence of all who went in at the gate of his city. After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. The field and the cave that is in it passed from the Hittites into Abraham's possession as a burying place.*

Abraham buys it all: the mineral rights, the timber rights, the property, the whole ball of wax is his...and sixty-three years after God promises him a land of his own, Abraham owns a piece of the promised land outright. He is a citizen now. He “belongs.”

Years ago, before I was the pastor here, I lived in the apartments across the street. We were building the Open Door, and a friend of mine called with an interesting invitation. He said, “I'd like to give you five or ten thousand dollars.” Hmmmm. This was an offer that doesn't come around very often. “What's the catch?” I asked. “You have to use it for a down payment”, he said. “I want you to buy a house in this neighborhood.”

I told him I had a place to live, but he said, “Yeah, but you're renting. You could leave any time. What I want is a mortgage to tie you down. I want you to own something here...”

I turned him down, and eventually left Crafton Heights...only to return five years later...by which time the offer was off the table, and so my mortgage was five or ten thousand dollars heavier than it would have been in 1986! But I have a mortgage...and while I wouldn't say that I'm “tied down” in Crafton Heights, I would say that I belong here. I am connected here. I feel at home as I walk these streets.

Listen: even though the name of God isn't mentioned in Genesis 23, this is a story about God's promises coming to pass. After 63 years of waiting, Abraham has found a home – right where God intends for him to be.

What do you know about that promise? What do you know about finding a place called home? A place to belong?

Here's what I want you to do right now: I want you to stop listening to me and spend three minutes listening to each other. Turn to someone that is close to you – or get up and move around, if you need to – and each of you answer this question: *“When is one time when you have felt*

*completely at home?”* When have you felt connected? When have you felt as though you belonged? I'd prefer that the person that you're talking to NOT be someone that you live with, or someone that you're particularly close to. Just get with someone right now and answer that question.

*Allow time for people to share; ask them to switch at the 1 minute mark.*

Now, stay where you are. Here's the next question that I want the two of you to discuss: *What is something that we could do to help someone who feels like a “stranger and a sojourner” feel ‘at home’ here at the Crafton Heights Church?”* You know what it is like to feel at home. You have shared with a friend about a time when he or she has felt that. What can we do to give people that experience in this room and in this community? Two minutes....go.

*Allow time for people to share; ask them to switch at the 1 minute mark.*

I have told this story before, but because I feel so at home, I'm going to tell it again. In about 1985, I was a part of a group of people that was charged to visit members who had left the church and see if we couldn't convince them to come back and worship with us. My partner was a delightful woman named Anna McAfee, who at the time was probably at least sixty years older than I.

As we made our visits, Anna asked me a simple question: she said, “Dave, do you ever feel left out? Do you ever feel as though you don't quite fit in at the church? Like you're an outsider, and everyone else gets it, but you don't?”

It was amazing! I'd been feeling that way ever since I arrived in 1982. I said, “Yes, Anna, yes! I've felt that way.”

And then she said in all helpfulness and sincerity, “You know, Dave, just put that out of your mind. That's how Frank and me felt when we first came here, but it got better.” I smiled. And she said with the sincerity of someone who was sure she was giving me great news, “In fact, that feeling will go away after about the first twenty years or so...”

YIKES! Twenty years or so? That was literally a lifetime!

Why are we here? Why do we gather each Sunday morning? Are we a special action group who all hold the same political views? Have we come because of the incredible social or employment benefits we hope to attain by virtue of being seen here? Is this a club – a nice little diversion?

Or are we here because we, like Abraham, have been changed by the power and the promise of God? Are we here because we have heard that promise and we, like Abraham, long to see it fulfilled in our own lives? Are we here because we think that maybe, just maybe, God intends to use us to change the world in the ways that he used Abraham to do the same thing?

That is who we are, my friends. We are the “great nation” that has sprung from Abraham and Isaac. We are the children of the promise. We are the means by which God will shape His world.

We, like Abraham, all have stories. You have heard one or two of those stories this morning. We were, at one time, all outsiders. But by the grace of God, we have come inside. We are now a part of the Body of Christ. Paul put it this way in his letter to the Ephesians – and I want you to listen closely to the language that he uses:

*So then you are not longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows*

*into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Eph. 2:19-22)*

Maybe you read the little article I wrote for the front page of the church newsletter this month. I hope so. In it, I talked about how God's people have been shaped by the ways that they listen – listen to God, listen to themselves, and listening to the world around them.

You are NOT Abraham – you do not have to buy your way into the promise today. You do not have to negotiate. All of that has been done for you by Jesus Christ. The charge that we have is to live and move and listen and share as those who are no longer strangers and sojourners, but as those who share in the promise. Take these questions with you as you leave: When have you felt at home? What can we do to help others feel more at home here? Ask yourselves these questions. And listen! Listen, beloved. And help your neighbors to find the kind of home that is not defined by rent or mortgage, but by belonging to the household of God. Amen.