

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost: July 16, 2023

“What’s in the Details?”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on the Seventh Day after Pentecost. All season we have been following the ancestors of Jesus. The ups and downs along with the personal dramas of the beginning generations of the Hebrew people.

Please know that these stories began as oral tales and have many nuances that we can’t always appreciate. I, for one, am guilty of not considering such nuances. The reason we study scripture is so that we can hear the stories of God in the lives of people who have lived before; hoping to gain some wisdom about our own selves and choices.

Our Old Testament reading for today starts with the reference that Rebecca was barren, and that after her husband Isaac prayed for her, she conceived. Well, it all seems pretty simple, and as I first read this story (and maybe you did the same) I felt that it read: Rebecca was barren, Isaac prayed, God hears the prayer and twins are born. But why does Rebecca’s story, again with the other previous generations, begin with barrenness?

This very brief one-verse account about Rebecca’s fertility continues the same theme we have been reading all through Pentecost. A story of God’s promise threatened by human imperfection and then God’s promise fulfilled

no matter what; which is the story that runs throughout the whole book of Genesis.

Just as with Sarah and Abraham, the theme of barrenness makes a powerful statement with regards to the power of God to bestow the unexpected gift of life in situations of barrenness and despair. However, there are several references regarding the age of Isaac only offered to the careful reader and details one can grasp as even more important. God's response.

Genesis says that Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebecca, and in verse 26 it says that he was 60 years old when the twins were born. One could very easily miss this contextual detail, and yet, these details indicate a 20-year span of time.

Twenty years of barrenness, of frustration; every month when Rebecca once more knows that pregnancy has not occurred. Twenty years of failure, shame, and frustration. And also, a much older husband with no heirs.

Why would these little details be included? It makes one wonder what other details we have lost through oral histories and translations. But the purpose of these stories is to try again to understand the God who has created us. I believe this story was written for us with the details it contains to allow us to see that prayers being answered are in God's timing.

What were the other unanswered prayers before Rebecca finally conceived? And how did Rebecca feel about all of this? Here we see the perseverance of a couple. We don't know if there were fights, or tears; we don't hear about being judged by other family members (maybe on a daily

or weekly basis). We don't hear about the desperation within the prayers offered to begin a family. We don't hear about the many times maybe both tried to walk away. We don't hear about the many times their faith almost failed them.

This story allows women who are seeking a spiritual anchor to share in the womanhood of barrenness, fertility and motherhood. Throughout an ancient history that is ever changing yet the same, the journey includes carrying the same, hope, dread, fear and grief that being female is. And even with prayers answered, for this couple the drama continues as they are not only granted one son, but two.

After Isaac's prayer is answered and the miracle of conception against all odds occurred, everything is not smooth sailing. Rebecca seems to be experiencing a difficult pregnancy, causing her to pray to God in anguish. The babies are struggling inside of her — a painful reality that foreshadows the strife that her offspring will know in the rest of the narrative. One wonders if this is the stress of a twenty-year wait for pregnancy.

God's answer again seems to not be the expected norm as he destines the two brothers to live a life of conflict. Then God reveals that the older (stronger) brother will be subordinate to the younger (weaker) brother. This divine revelation may explain why Rebecca would later side with Jacob; the one who before his birth already had been chosen by God. And Jacob was by far not a perfect being, as future scripture will inform us.

This makes a strong case for God's grace — a God who is already involved with people from their mother's womb, within the very messiness and

conflict of relationships. This story is a reminder that God works within his own time and own ways: ways that we, not unlike our Biblical characters struggle through daily life to understand.

Whatever barrenness in your life you are struggling with, whatever prayer you feel is unanswered, may you find comfort in knowing you are not alone. This is how God works. So, persevere and have hope, and be careful what you pray for.

Amen