
“Why Do I Live?”

Genesis 25:19-34

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 13, 2014 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

I could talk about Jacob and Esau who usually steal the biblical spotlight in this narrative. They're twins in tension. One will be stronger than the other, and the elder shall serve the younger. As the youngest in my family, I really like that last part (I hope my oldest brother is listening this morning!). Esau loved hunting outdoors. Jacob was a quiet man who loved the indoors of his tent. Esau was first and hairy and red and loved to eat red stuff; all of this talk about red makes me wonder if he was actually Irish. Jacob is second and grabbed Esau's heel. He's a fierce, shrewd, little "rascal" (Walter Brueggemann) who holds his foodie brother hostage to food for his birthright. To make things worse, Mom and Dad get involved in this brotherly battle. Isaac loved Esau but Rebekah loved Jacob.

I could talk more about Isaac whose age gets attention as if he's the one who has to give birth (it's obvious the writer of Genesis is not a woman). Isaac was 60 years old when the twins were born. But I'm pretty sure that having twins is not a best-seller on your bucket list of things to do near retirement. I could say a lot more about Isaac or the twins.

But Rebekah gave me my sermon title. "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" Why do I live? Not *how* should I live but *why*? Like Sarah before her and Rachel after her, Rebekah was barren. Her husband was a child of promise (21:1-7) and she was from good family stock (25:20) but even that was not an antibiotic against emptiness and disappointment. Privileged pedigree can't prevent pain. In a patriarchal society, barrenness was not a positive thing as it was thought that having children added value to womanhood. But then the Lord answers Isaac's prayer and intervenes to allow Rebekah to conceive. This should be great news after 20 years of waiting to have a baby and now she's even having twins. But we learn that "the children struggled together within her." That experience is what causes her to ask the question that is still so relevant for our day—"if it is to be this way, why do I live?" Rebekah is caught in a web of suffering.

First, the pain of barrenness. Then, the pain of struggle between her sons. It's as if her suffering is eternal and inescapable. She was "tossed about, with many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings and fears within, without" ("Just As I Am"). There was a struggle within her but then to see her twin sons battle over the family legacy must have killed her. Two very different children from the same mother and father. One a CEO of a Fortune 500 company; the other locked up in prison for selling drugs in a red light district. "If it is to be this way..." My barrenness was broken in order to create another brokenness in my family? If I can never experience the bounty of joy, why live? Is there any reason for living if my struggle and pain never go away and every time I turn around there's another problem? If I can't escape the pain, what's the point? Why do I live? Like a person contemplating suicide as a means to stop the pain, Rebekah asks a question that may be on our mind—why do I live?

When our pain seems to be from everlasting to everlasting in a perpetual cycle of suffering, we may ask this question too. Conflict permeates this narrative as it does our lives. Job was right when he said, "human beings are born to trouble just as birds fly upward" (Job 5:7). Just because there is a promise from the God of Abraham does not mean there won't be pain—Rebekah reveals this. Just because we may be chosen by God does not mean we will live a trouble-free life. The call of God may include a call to strife and struggle and confrontation. Being a Christian is not the eschewal of pain. We can't romanticize the Christian faith to think that it only includes blessings; there are burdens to bear as well. To be a Christian means to be a cross-bearer and if you make the sign of the cross, you are marking yourself with a symbol of suffering. There is no way around it when

one serves a God whose salvific means includes a bloody cross. Howard Thurman, who's graced this pulpit in years past, says that "pain has a ministry" in that the fact of pain may help us understand life in a fuller way.

Life is not well-manicured and pedicured. It is not perfect sans struggle. We are confronted with the presence of suffering in the Christian life and suffering is only a scandal if one assumes Christianity bears no scars on its historical body and Christ bears no scars on his resurrected body. Now this does not mean that God sends suffering or causes it. One theologian tells us that "God's gracious will for his creatures—his willing of all things to his own infinite goodness—is the creative power that makes all things to be and the consummate happiness to which all things are called; but this does not (indeed, must not) mean that everything that happens is merely a direct expression of God's desire for his creatures or an essential stage within the divine plan for history...." (David Bentley Hart). He goes further to say that there is no need to provide "a divine rationale for every dimension of every event in which [God's] creatures are involved, no matter how much those events might reflect that ultimate privation, evil." This understanding is in direct opposition to the notion that God's goodness is realized not just in spite of but by way of cruelty, misery, and catastrophe. God does not ordain pain and commission it into the world.

Yet, the struggle is still real within Rebekah and inside and outside us. It's there and cannot be denied. Suffering makes an indelible stamp on the world and on Christian discipleship. But we should not pray to suffer as a masochistic means to union with Christ, because just as Christ prayed, we naturally plead, "Take this cup from me" (Luke 22:42). Suffering is a fact and it is not necessarily redemptive. Think of the most horrific story of death or pain you have ever heard; many times, it's not redeemable.

"If it is to be this way...." This way, this path I must travel. My child has cancer, my parent has dementia, I struggle with mental illness, I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...for I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do"(Rom 7). "If it is to be this way, why do I live?"

Rebekah, like us, can't make sense of her suffering and maybe believes somehow that human life should not include pain and suffering. Belief in a painless existence could be a product of bowing down to a sanitized, Clorox bleached Christ. We're not saved to escape suffering in this life nor are we called by God for ourselves. That may be part of the problem in this selfie generation. We have forgotten why we truly live or for whom we live. In the selfie technological orbit, it might appear that we live to see ourselves because it is all about the self. See my new haircut. See my new outfit. See my bircher muesli breakfast. See my dog sleeping. See my dog jumping. See my dog wagging his tail. See me with my dog. I just woke up. I just returned from a jog in record time. I just repainted and redesigned my office. See my office. See me preaching in Duke Chapel! It is a see me era and the technological gadgets have rightly been called "iGods" (Craig Detweiler).

iBook, iMac, iPod, iPhone, iPad. i. When Steve Jobs first introduced the iMac in 1998, he said that the 'i' stood for internet, *individual*, instruct, inform, inspire. If one bows to these iGods it may feed into the overemphasis on 'i' and it is a little lowercased 'i.' Little because perhaps we have been reduced to a smaller size following these gods, particularly the individual 'i' that is consumed by selfies when we shouldn't really be gazing only at ourselves but at the face of God. It is when we encounter God, like Isaiah in the temple (Isaiah 6), that we may begin to see ourselves for who we really are and recognize why we live. If we only do selfies it fosters an i-world where our lives revolve around ourselves when in fact the self is not actually the real goal.

The apostle Paul reminds us in Galatians that "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). I but not I. Our identity becomes more whole with God's presence and with Christ in us, our lives take on his mission, even if we suffer, even "If it is to be this way...."

I want to suggest that there was something within Rebekah that was bigger than Rebekah, despite everything she endured. The question, "Why do I live?" may seem to be only about the individual self and in a selfie generation it may be difficult to imagine beyond our i-universe but even God tells Rebekah, "Two nations are in

your womb.” Edom and Israel. She may not have even understood what was happening but nations were a product of Rebekah’s life. Her life was more than her life. There was a larger purpose within her that went beyond her because even in the midst of struggle God was at work in and through her in the larger story of salvation of the world.

This is a reminder that we are not our own (1 Cor 6) but we belong to God. “My life is not my own to you I belong, I give myself, give myself to you.” “Here I am, Lord.” I do not own my life; I am a steward of the life which I have been given. We are servants of Christ. We are a part of God’s story of salvation thus our lives are not for us; they are for God. Why do I live? We live for God. Some may say, “I live to eat, drink, and be merry. I live to work. I live for my family. I live to be loved. I live to serve and do good. I live to discover the latest innovation in technology. I live to find a cure for cancer. Some of these are noble goals but our Christian vocation, the reason we live, has to do with God and what God desires for the redemption of the world. We can’t say like William Ernest Henley, “I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul” because we live for God.

What or who you live for says something about what or who you will die for. Why do I live? Why do you live? There may be much struggle in your life these days and we can’t rationalize or explain away the suffering. Yet there is a purpose within you bigger than you as big as the world God came to redeem in Christ. God loved the world that he gave his only Son. To save the world includes conflict and tension and suffering and death. God has reasons that human reason will never know.

And God is not into selfies. God is into us, into us so much that God became one of us and took on our pain. “He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering... acquainted with infirmity...wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.” So much suffering that Jesus even asked his own ‘why’ question—my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why do I live to die? We are not alone. Jesus asks Rachel’s and our question and we live to answer his question for we are the answer. He died for us that we might live.

We live for God despite what we may endure but God lived, died, rose, and lives for us, forever. Who God died for says something about who God lives for, eternally. It is to be this way and because of it, I do live and “I know that my redeemer lives and that in the end he will stand on the earth”(Job 19:25). Why do I live? “Because he lives, I can face tomorrow; because he lives, all fear is gone; because I know who holds the future and life is worth the living just because he lives.”