

“Our Covenants”

Genesis 24

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My grandfather taught me how to fish. When I think back on my earliest memories of standing on the edge of a pond by my grandparent’s farmhouse in Mason, Michigan; or when I got my first rod and reel or when I finally had my own knife and could clean my own fish; my grandfather “Pete”(they called him that even though his name was William and I never did figure out why, even his kids called him Pete) Pete was present at all those times. I didn’t see him that much or get to know him well because we lived in Colorado. But at least once a year, we would see them. If we didn’t come back to Michigan for Christmas or a summer vacation, then my grandparents would make the drive out to Colorado to spend time with us. I suppose they came to see my parents as well, but we felt valued enough as their grandchildren that we believed that they really came to see us. And when they did, there was always camping and fishing to be done... And my grandfather taught me to fish.

My grandmother, on the other hand, taught me how to swear. I’m sure there were lots of other things I learned from her, but whenever we stayed at the farm, early in the morning, Granny would head out to the barn to milk the cows and clean out the stalls. And she would ask my brother and me if we wanted to come with her. Of course we did, because *there were things that happened in that barn* that we didn’t have any experience with at our home in Colorado. When we got out to the barn, Granny would take a pitchfork and start breaking up a bale of hay for the cows and getting them ready to milk. It is probably worth mentioning that my grandmother couldn’t have been any taller than 5’2” with red curly hair and blue eyes—very much like our

daughter Annie—but her size in no way hindered her effectiveness or stunted her confidence with those cows. As she poked at the hay the cows would try to nose each other out of the way, and even push Granny aside to get to the hay. This is when she had some choice words for each of them, and my brother and I were secretly thrilled by this vocabulary that was unknown in the house, but seemed to be very useful in the barn. After the cattle were settled she would start shoveling out the stalls and she'd allow us to help (but only a little because—unlike the rest of the Jennings cousins who grew up on or near the farm here in Michigan—Granny treated us like we were city kids—if you can call Boulder a city—we were too city-slick to risk getting anything on our clothes and upsetting our mother or worse, getting kicked by a cow or crushed because you didn't know to stand only on the leftside. We'd go back inside for breakfast not having helped all that much but with some new words to add to our vocabulary when our parents weren't around.

What did you learn from *your* grandparents? We are all part of the generations that have gone before us and we learn from them. Families will transmit vital information from one generation to the next. And—even in the absence of information—many find out through ancestry searches or DNA analysis that genetic propensity and behavioral patterns are passed on as well, even in the absence of direct knowledge and experience. Families are powerful, whether we intend them to be or not; whether we grew up in a strong one or isolated from one another, They have a way of claiming us despite our best efforts to escape them.

Now I'm sure that there is much that my grandparents taught me other than fishing and swear words, although skills and expressions are things that can be passed from one generation to the next. Looking back now, I can appreciate that this farm sensibility was something in my patriarchal line for generations, all the way back to Levi Jennings who bought some land in

Southport New York almost 200 years ago and farmed it with his family, including Pete's grandfather, William.

Now this link was broken when my father left the farm and went to school at Central and then at State and eventually to pursue a Ph.D in physics in Boulder. So I didn't have much farm-sensibility to pass onto my kids but there are times when I speak to my children and I have to pause and turn around because I'm sure my father must be there because the words that I just spoke were exactly what he used to say to me.

We all learn things from our grandparents and our parents. What did you learn from *your* parents? Some of you have parents that are still living as I do, and that is a blessing. Some of your parents have passed on and so I'm sure that you have had some time to reflect on what they left for you, what they taught you through the years. What have you received from your parents?

My father was a scientist and a musician. And although I don't have his brain for physics and math and I don't have his musical talent, I do have a respect for science and a trust in science as part of the search for truth. And although I'm not musically talented, I used to love to listen to him play and sing and I still love music. He was able to pass those things down to me.

The story we read about Abraham and Isaac and Rebekah is about passing the *covenant* to the next generation. Abraham had been promised that he would be the father of a great nation. God had promised him that the son that was born to him and Sarah would be the beginning of a multitude of descendants, as numerous as the stars in the sky or as the grains of sand on the shore. But Sarah had now passed on, and Isaac wasn't showing any signs of beginning to produce all these children. Abraham began to worry. And he not only worried about Isaac having children, but he worried about what those children would learn from their parents. He

didn't want his grandchildren to learn about the gods and religious practices of the Canaanite tribes who lived closest to him and he didn't want the flocks and herds and precious possessions that he had accumulated through his life to be dispersed among those tribes through marriage, so he decides that his son should marry a woman just like the woman who had *married dear old dad*. (Remember that old song?) Abraham decides that he should keep everything in the family and so he sends his servant back to the land of his birth to arrange a marriage with his extended family for his son Isaac. He decides that this is the best way to ensure that not only would his property stay intact, but that the covenant that he had made with God would be passed on to the next generation as well. It is vital to him that the promise that God had made to him of a blessing of family and the promise of the land got passed on to his son and to his grandchildren. That's where Rebekah comes in. As a mother, she would be the link to pass the covenant on.

As I've said, I learned from my father, but I also learned from *my* mother. Before we went to bed, my mother would read my brother and me. My memories of these readings are sitting on her lap in our living room and looking on as she read stories from a children's bible. She would read the stories from the bible and we would look at the pictures. To this day I'm sure my images of what Jesus looked like, or what Noah's ark was like, or the friendship of David and Jonathan, come from the stories and pictures that my mother shared with us all those years ago. She taught me a love for the Bible and a love for stories. In a way, she passed on faith to me.

Fishing has not been a big part of our children's lives. I didn't really do much to pass that legacy on to our kids, but perhaps I'll have a grandchild someday that I can take camping and fishing. I'm sure that without wanting to there are some swear words that I learned from my grandmother that I've now passed down to my kids. But I hope there are other things that Erin and I have

given to them. Have we given them the love of stories, a love of the bible? Have we given them a desire to search for truth and souls that are stirred and comforted by music?

What did you learn from your parents?

And of course, the next question is, what are you passing on to your children? Or, for those who might not have their own children, what are we passing onto the next generation? Are we passing onto them a better world? A cleaner environment? A moral compass? An audacious hope that the covenant God has made with us is still vital and is for everyone?

Abraham wanted to pass that on to Isaac and to succeeding generations and I do too. But as we find from later stories, God has to speak to Isaac himself, Abraham can't do that for him.

Abraham can teach him what God has done for him, tell him the stories of how God spoke to him, tell him about the promises God made to him, but he can't make God speak to Isaac or Isaac to God. But he can do his best to set that up. He can tell him the story. He can pass on what God has done for him, so that when Isaac has need for God, when God speaks to him, that Isaac is ready to listen and the covenant becomes not just the covenant with Abraham but with Abraham and Isaac.

What are we passing on to our children? Are they learning the stories? Are they learning what God has done in our lives? Have they learned that the things we have done in our lives were informed by prayer, acted on in faith, and that we have walked into the unknown buoyed by a trust in God? Have they seen us as people of faith? Have we passed on the stories of the Bible, the ability to pray, the joy of worship? And of course, I'm not just talking to those of you who are biologically parents, I'm talking to all of you. Because it is all our responsibility. That's the deal we make at every baptism. When we take a child and put some water on her head in the

name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and then we walk her out into the midst of the congregation, we make a promise. In the old words of the promise, we say that we will help raise that child in the “nurture and admonition of the Lord.” These days we say that we promise through prayer and example, by word and deed, to help her to be a faithful Christian. That’s not just a promise that parents make. That’s a promise we make. That’s our covenant. That’s what we try to pass down to our children. And make no mistake. These are all our children. What are we teaching them? Are we teaching them love and encouragement by the words we speak to them? Do we ever tell them we pray for them? Do we show we are interested in them, that they are a part of this community of faith as much as anyone? In two weeks we will host our yearly Vacation Bible School. This might be a chance to be involved, to be part of passing on the covenant; teaching, greeting, helping with the kids, helping with a meal, contributing materials to the crafts? How about praying for the children, for the leaders, for those preparing? Even when it's over, might you ask in the weeks to come, “Did you go to Bible School? What did you do? What did you learn?”

What did we learn from our parents? That question is deserving of some reflection. What are we teaching our children? That question is not only deserving of reflection but of action, because we are teaching right now, every day.