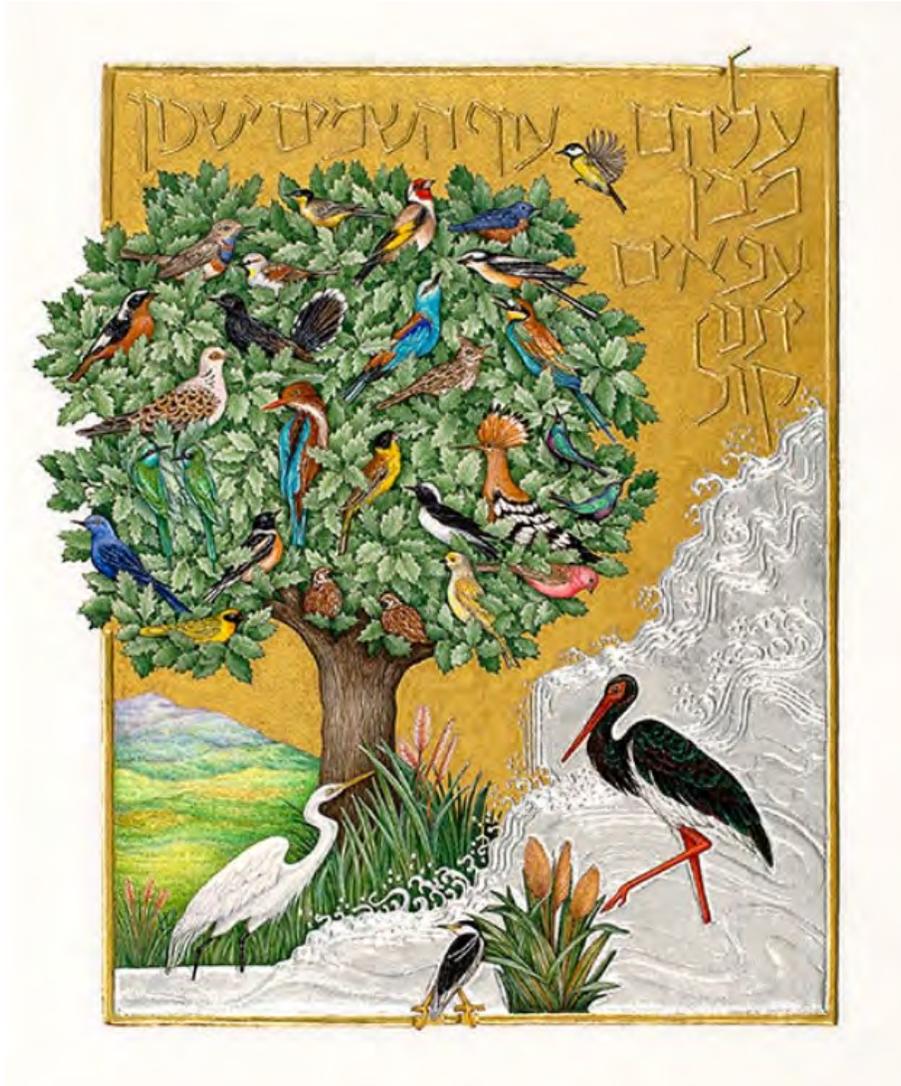


Creation - Genesis 1-2, John 1:1-5



Barbara Wolff, Among the Branches they Sing

Every passage in the Old Testament contains intimations of Christ's coming, and some stories are particularly clear in their foreshadowing. Creation obviously foreshadows Christ as the one who brings a new creation. But the gospel of John tells us that Christ was present as the creator, and his word gave life and light. John united the man Christ with the maker of the splendors of the outdoors, the complexity of our bodies, and the subtlety of our minds that can create art, technology, literature, and community. God, the artist, paints and sculpts and writes and composes in the natural world.

Scripture uses nature as a source of metaphors, comparing Christ to things from each day of the creation poem: light, water, rock, vines, a morning star, lamb, lion

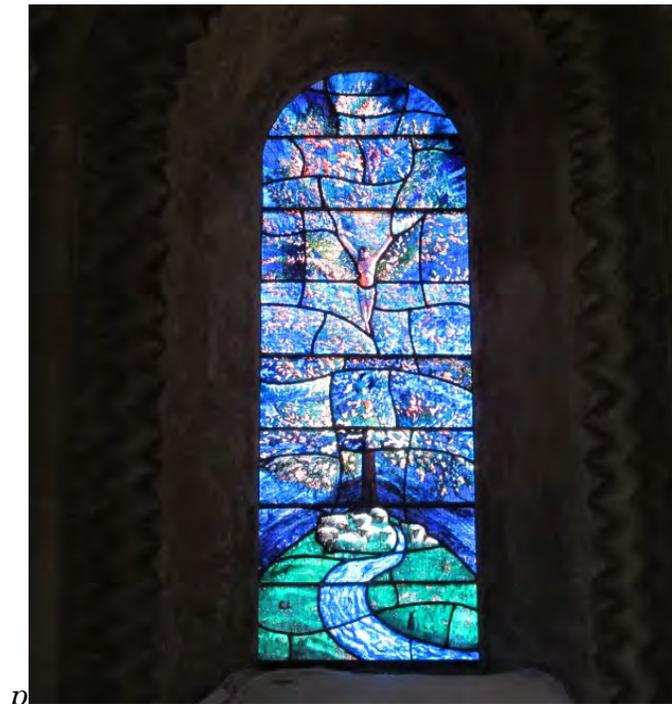
and many others. The environment is made on the first three days, and what moves within each environment is paralleled in the next three days.

The first poem ends in the first few verses of chapter 2 and announces God's rest on the seventh day. It then goes on to describe how God gave mankind everything needed: life, a place to live, beauty, fruit, water, limits, knowledge, work, companionship, marriage, language, and connection to the creatures of the world. The invitation to relationship sets up the whole subsequent story of God caring about us, carrying on conversations, leading us, quarreling with us, and passionately loving us.

The Hubble Space Telescope has so greatly expanded our understanding of the immensity and complexity of the universe that our wonder at God's vastness and power is increased. At the same time, the message that God became a small infant becomes an even greater source of wonder. A daily act of worship in noticing created things evokes our appreciative awe and is worth writing down. This habit has made me more alert to the beautiful things of nature that are my constant companions. We can also imitate the Psalm which calls for elements of creation to join us in joyful praise. "Let every created thing give praise to the Lord."

Do I celebrate Christ as the creator? Do I see his lavish provision of beauty in our world today? Do I see how these early stories prepare us to see the one who comes to start the new creation?

Making us — Genesis 2, Colossians 1:15-17



p

Roger Wagner, The Flowering Tree

Christ demonstrated God's love by preparing a home for us. Today we are aware of what a unique home our planet is, are more curious than ever about what makes a planet habitable, and are finding possible planets to explore. One issue is the distance from the sun so the temperature is right, along with enough protection from solar radiation. Another is the existence of liquid water and carbon. We do not yet understand all the factors, but we know that the combination is rare and special. Here we see God as our provider.

The previous chapter spoke of the creation of mankind on day six, but the second story is more detailed and personal. God gave mankind everything needed: life, a place to live, beauty, fruit, water, limits, knowledge, work, companionship, marriage, language, and connection to the creatures of the world. The invitation to relationship sets up the whole subsequent story of God caring about us, carrying on conversations, leading us, quarreling with us, and passionately loving us.

There are mysterious but intriguing details: there was no rain, there are named rivers, and exceptionally pure gold and onyx. It is a reminder that these stories were told in times and places far away from us, and perhaps it is inevitable we do not understand everything. However, modern researchers have taken all that is here and proposed some possible places to fit the clues, locating Eden near where we know agriculture began in the middle east.

Some have seen Adam's sleep which brought his bride to life as an analogy to Christ's death and resurrection which brought his bride, the church, to life. The forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil is juxtaposed with the mysterious tree of life. These are the first symbolic trees of scripture, and these and many more will point to Christ's tree, the literal wooden cross that solves the problem of good and evil and gives life that does not end.

Do I acknowledge that because God is my creator, I am not my own? Have I personally accepted that Christ's cross is the solution to my sin?

Leaving Paradise - Genesis 3



Marc Chagall, Adam and Eve expelled from paradise

Christ was perfectly obedient and led others to life, unlike disobedient Adam and Eve who led others to death. In a parable Christ said the devil introduced evil into the world just as this mysterious story says evil came through a talking snake.

We are introduced to something that becomes a backdrop to many stories: suffering and death are consequences of disobedience to God, yet there is always a loving and merciful call to return. In this story we see how God told them not to hide from him and covered their shame. We learn that it is safe to be vulnerable with our creator.

The promise of a descendant who will crush the serpent's head prefigures Christ, showing us that God chose to be with us, leaving paradise and joining us in our exile. Sacrifice as the means of transformation is also introduced, something that will be elaborated and will culminate in the cross. Later Paul will explain that death came through Adam, but resurrection came through Christ and through him we are given new life.

Angels stood with swords of light to keep mankind out, separating sin and holiness. As God showed mercy, angels no longer kept mankind away from him, but welcomed us: angels were part of the tabernacle and temple, they spoke at the empty tomb, and they spoke at Christ's ascension. In the parable, Christ spoke of the end time work of the angels in judgment and mercy, rejection and welcome.

Christ's invitation is to to turn from our sin, and to live our daily lives in the preview of paradise. To do this requires recognizing the separation from him and asking for the gift of salvation in Christ. In addition to doing this for the first time, it is good to examine ourselves with God's help on a daily basis. The fundamental message is that God loves us no matter what and will forgive our sins if we but ask.

Have I recognized that my sins deserve death and separation from God and humbly come to him in repentance? Do I recognize my own disobedience and turn to God for forgiveness on a daily basis?

Cain and Abel — Genesis 4, Luke 23:46-47



Sadeo Watanabe, Cain and Abel

Abel was the first innocent victim recorded in the Bible, and so prefigured Christ, a good man who did not deserve death. The story introduces death and murder as part of the terrible reality of our world. Abel's blood cried out for vengeance, and that need for justice continues. In Christ, God suffered with the victim as he still does today.

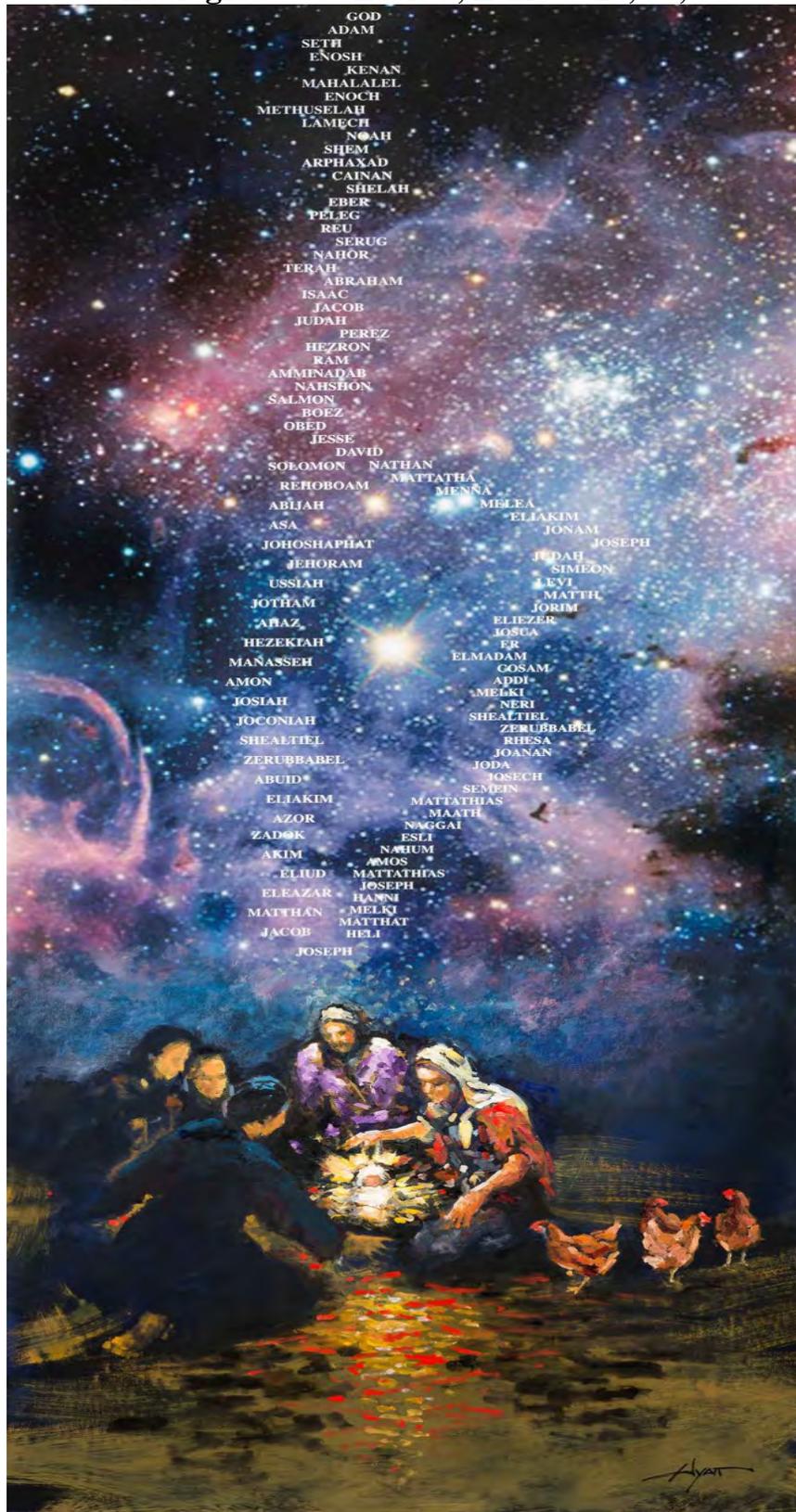
Cain received a measured punishment, exile rather than death. God condemned the violence and yet simultaneously showed mercy for the murderer. When Lamech committed murder, he misinterpreted God's mercy to Cain, imaging it was a crime with no consequences.

Christ warned that it is not just murder we need to beware of, but that anger itself is spiritually dangerous. We need to ask ourselves: Do I erupt with verbal violence? Am I harsh? Do I discipline impulsively? What is my reputation regarding resolving conflict?

And do I see Christ in those who are victims of violence? Am I quick to side with their need for justice? At the same time, do I see the possibility of redemption for those who are the perpetrators of violence? Do I acknowledge that they, too, are people God made and loves?

Where do I need to change regarding violence?

Genealogies — Genesis 5, Luke 3: 23, 37, 38



Hyatt Moore, Creator of the Cosmos in a Manger

Scripture genealogy starts broadly with all nations, then narrows to Abraham's descendants, and finally to the point: Christ. They make dull devotional reading, but serve an important purpose to link the scriptures together and show us how it is one story. God knew the plot-line from the beginning and populated his story with lively characters.

There are mysteries: the long life-spans, and the disappearance of Enoch. In all there are 18 chapters devoted to genealogy in the Hebrew scripture ending with Christ's genealogies in the New Testament. Genealogies are not the only dull reading, and the following poem asks why.

Why is this here?
Land records and family trees
Public health codes and liturgy manuals
Donor lists and instructions for craftsmen
Architectural descriptions and org charts

Amid the poetry, dramatic stories, and wisdom
Is all the ordinary, work-day information
It gives authenticity,
A touch of the materials of history.
I suppose it's too hard to preach from lists
So without reading all of scripture ourselves
We can easily lose the sense
Of how much God must approve of the mundane.

The seemingly extraneous and down-to-earth details in scripture force us to realize that it is not a magic answer book, but it a book of stories, of the history of real people, and that the details increase authenticity.

How do I see the passages of scripture that seem dull and irrelevant to my life?

Noah — Genesis 6-7, I Peter 3:19-20



John August Swanson, Building the ark

Noah is an archetype of an obedient, righteous person who is the means of salvation for those willing to listen. In this sense he is like Christ who in perfect obedience provides salvation for the whole world. We see that God is a rescuer, a first-responder.

The ark Noah built has multiple imagery: the church, a place of safety and salvation, and Christ who shelters us from judgment. The wood of the ark reminds us of the wood of the cross. The waters serve as imagery of the symbolic death of baptism and subsequent resurrection.

While we do not know how many people died in the flood, and it raises questions about God's goodness and mercy in allowing people to be killed by natural disasters, war, disease, or interpersonal violence. In this case, the tone is a sorrowful one of disappointment, repeating twice "I am sorry I ever made them." It "broke his heart." The flood, it is said, was designed to put an end to mankind's violence and depravity, and attempt to start over with one righteous family. A surgical intervention. There is a word of mercy in the New Testament passage that Christ preached to those from the time of Noah when he descended into hell after his death.

Today some Christians see natural disasters as a sign of God's judgment, though perhaps it is wiser to speak of his sovereignty in permitting such things and apply the exhortation to pray if we are suffering. Christ urged caution about concluding that disasters equaled judgment, but called us to have a humble recognition that we all need to respond in repentance.

How do I understand God as one who both has mercy and judges? Have I appealed for his mercy in my own life?

Rescue — Genesis 8-9, I Peter 3:21



Sandra Bowden, The Flood

Peter made the connection for us between Noah's flood and the waters of baptism that Christ called us to experience as a sign of his taking us from death to life. It symbolizes God's loving rescue from destruction of those who turn to him. God's post-flood promise emphasized his love for every creature he has made.

The dove, a symbol of the Holy Spirit and of peace, reveals that judgment has passed. The rainbow reminds us of the glory of God. Thus we see the Trinity:

Christ as ark; the dove as Spirit; and the rainbow as the Father on the throne. Noah's sacrifice points toward Christ's sacrifice. After the flood a covenant with and promise to Noah included all living creatures. The covenant with all of creation is repeated seven times, emphasizing that God has a covenant with all his creatures and motivating what today we are calling "creation care", recognizing the extent of humankind's failure to honor this.

After this remarkable start to a new world, sin is evident once more. We have the first instance of drunkenness, which continues as a scourge even today, and the first instance of a parent cursing his grandchild. Some interpreters say that since this was a human curse, not of God, it was simply an expression of bad temper and guilt on the part of Noah after his binge. That has not kept it from being used as an excuse for slavery, something Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called "a blasphemy" and an idea completely contrary to the Christian faith.

The blessing that Noah gave to Shem, however, is fulfilled in the call of Abraham, the creation of Israel, and the coming of Christ. While sad that starting over with one righteous family immediately failed, hope is reintroduced, looking forward to someone who can both preserve us and cleanse us from sin.

The promise of rescue and restoration from the disasters of our lives often include small hopeful signs. Like the olive leaf in the dove's beak, we also receive tiny signs. Despite the hopeless situation we see, there are signs the change is coming. At a time when I was struggling with long-delayed answers to prayer, I saw a beautiful rainbow in the sky that reminded me of Noah's hope.

Do I see this story in my own life: the destruction of sin in baptism, rescue and redemption, and a life of hope?

The Nations — Genesis 10, 11:10-32, Psalm 9, Matthew 1:1



Hyatt Moore, Throne Throng

In these two chapters, the story of all nations narrows to the story of one person, Abraham, who becomes the founder of the particular nation from which Christ will come. Matthew began his genealogy of Christ from that point, unlike Luke who went back to Noah and Adam. The unique starting over that Abraham represents is the core story of the scripture, but none of the nations are forgotten. Allies or enemies, respectful or disrespectful of God, they were all to be targets of blessing through Abraham.

It has been pointed out that if one counts, there are 70 nations listed. This looks ahead to other symbolic groups of 70 that are part of redemption: 70 of Abraham's family moving to Egypt, 70 Israelite elders who share a covenant meal with God, and 70 disciples Jesus sent to preach.

Human nature is to prefer our own family, our own group, our own nations. God's vision has always been universal, and just as Abraham was selected to be a blessing, we also are to have that universal vision. This list of nations reminds us that this is God's vision—He loves every person and every nation. The Psalm assures us that God will judge nations justly, repeating six times the message that God is in control of all. Christ fulfilled this in sending his disciples to all nations.

In our age of many prejudices we need to challenge ourselves to cross cultural boundaries and learn God's universal love. The many cultural boundaries I have crossed have enriched my life, teaching me curiosity, openness, respect, and certainty that God loves every person.

Do I share a vision with Christ of his love for all nations?

Babel — Genesis 11, Acts 2:1-4



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Tower of Babel

Pentecost reverses Babel. At Babel languages were multiplied and caused separation. At Pentecost people heard the gospel in their own language and were unified. Perhaps one can say that the separation caused by Babel is the negative, and the unity brought by Pentecost is the photograph. The confusion (which is what Babel means) is overcome and brought into order by the Word (Christ). Language, invisible but essential to life, makes a good metaphor for God.

Today's Bible translators transform Babel into Pentecost, and are preparing for a heavenly celebration of people from all languages. God seems to love language, even incorporating multiple languages into scripture itself.

All of us need a calling, a vocation
Jesus called the disciples
And he's never stopped calling
Great leaders of the church

Augustine, Jerome, Calvin, Tyndale, John Wycliffe, John Wesley,
William Carey, Hudson Taylor, Billy Graham, Cameron Townsend,
Ken Taylor, Eugene Peterson

All in a great chain to the present
Lovers of God's Word, they were translators.

We know now there are over 7000 language groups
And 1,800 do not have scriptures in their language.
Here is the goal: Projects underway in all languages by 2025.
I imagine there are a lot of people
Jesus is ready to call to this work.
"Drop what you're doing and follow me.
Transfer your skills to my program!"

Do I share a love for all cultures, all nations?

Call of Abram — Genesis 12, Hebrews 11:8-10



James Tissot, The Caravan of Abraham

Christ's incarnation is prefigured in Abram, who left his home and became a pilgrim. Abram's journey, symbolized by the tent in which he lived, parallels God's journey among the people of Israel in a tent, and parallels Christ living among us. Christ did not cling to his position but became a pilgrim, born as mortal man.

God promised that all the families on the earth would be blessed through Abram, a clear prophetic preview of Christ. Even when Abram and Sarai made poor choices to lie about their relationship in a foreign land, God protected them, knowing his plan would be ruined if Sarai became the wife of another.

As the father of faith, Abram's story raises questions for us. How could he be sure he was hearing from God? We have not only scripture stories of promise and fulfillment, we have centuries of people who say they heard from God and what he said happened. We even have plenty of living testimonies. His example of faith challenges us to listen.

In my life I have made moves to new places, understanding this to be part of God's call to me. In a great spirit of adventure, I have tried to be of service, part of bringing God's promised blessing to earth. The life of a pilgrim is meant to be one where we do what Hebrews says Abram did: "He went without knowing where he was going. And even when he reached the land God promised him, he lived there by faith."

Am I making choices about where to live and what to do based on God's call to me?

Abram and Lot — Genesis 13, Luke 9:58



Jan Victors, Abraham's Parting from the family of Lot

Abram was like Christ in his pilgrim life, and Lot is like those who cannot accept Christ's call, turning away, because they find the world more attractive. We can apply God's promise of a place for Abram to our own need for a place in the world. God is our landlord.

Because both men had prospered, the land could not support all of their livestock and they made the decision to separate. Abram gave his nephew the first choice of where to go. In the next chapter we see that this resulted in Lot's capture by warring kings, and Abram's sacrificial work to rescue him and his family.

Lot was drawn to more exciting city life among people who were rebellious toward God, and the consequences were grim. Abram chose better. Today so much entices us to Lot-like choices. But Abram received a much deeper gift—the promise of the land as a permanent possession and abundant descendants, not only physical ones, but we who are his spiritual descendants as well.

In a time when we overvalue our homes, we must remember that we, like Abram, are on a pilgrimage, and not put our roots down too deeply in the world. Am I willing to listen to God and obey even if challenged to leave my comfort zone and reach across barriers or make a difficult move? Can I let go of my home, my family, and my things if that is God's call? What risks am I willing to take in faith?

Is my ultimate quest beyond this life?

Melchizedek — Genesis 14, Hebrews 7:1-3



Basilica of San Marco, Venice

Christ is a prophet, mediator, priest, and king like Melchizedek. Hebrews 7 is an extended meditation on how Melchizedek and Christ compare to one another, emphasizing Christ's priesthood, superior to the priesthood of the law. Melchizedek is a King of righteousness and peace, the same description Isaiah will give Messiah

1500 years later. Melchizedek ruled Jerusalem where Christ would teach, be killed, resurrect, and inaugurate his kingdom. In Christ, God showed himself to be like this peaceful king.

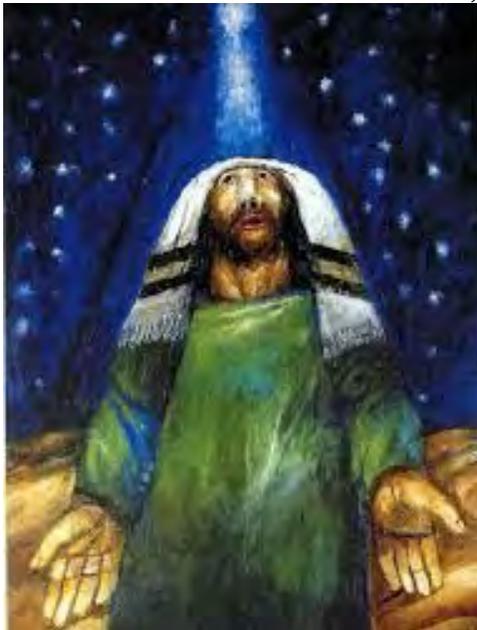
Melchizedek's appearance previews the theme of coming King and Kingdom. Abraham had not yet been given the promise of kings as his descendants. However, he had interacted with kings, receiving protection from Pharaoh, rescuing Lot from the marauding kings, and then honoring and sharing a communion meal with this king.

War between different coalitions, the cost to civilians who became prisoners or refugees, the need to rescue and protect civilians, and the importance of not taking economic advantage of war are all introduced in this chapter and still familiar today. The contrast between these warring kings and the peaceful king Melchizedek emphasizes the contrast between our warring nations and Christ's peaceable kingdom.

In the Hebrew scriptures we see four identities that will apply to Christ—king, priest, warrior/liberator, and prophet. In this instance Abram carries the identity of the liberating warrior to rescue his nephew. As a prophet Melchizedek recognizes Abram as particularly blessed by God, plays a priestly role, and is called a king. Christ takes on all of these roles and we benefit from each aspect of his character and work.

Do I recognize Christ as my priest and king?

The Covenant with Abram — Genesis 15, Acts 3:25-26



Sieger Köder

Abram was promised many descendants when he did not even have one child, and he believed God and God honored his faith. His greatest descendant, Christ, was the ultimate fulfillment of the promise of blessing the whole earth through his descendants.

Very humanly, Abram asked, "How can I be sure?" God made the promise a binding contract, or covenant. In our time, paper, lawyers, and notarized signatures would be the method; in that time, it involved a ceremony with sacrifices. The sacrifice reminds us of the cross, the darkness that unnaturally occurred from noon to three p.m. during the crucifixion. God appeared as a flaming torch going through the sacrifices, something we can compare to Christ as the light shining in the dark. Abram was warned of the oppression his descendants would experience, but was promised they would return after 400 years and would own the land.

God told Abram to look at the stars. He could see perhaps half of the 9,000 stars visible to the naked eye, and had no idea that eventually with a telescope we would be able to see 200,000. Today the Hubble Space telescope allows scientists to estimate there are 100-170 billion galaxies in the observable universe, and that we may eventually be able to see farther to see more. They estimate a total of a septillion stars (7×10 with 24 zeros!), a mind-boggling number. It is an astonishing promise for a man who had no children at all.

His faith challenges me. Am I willing to believe that God will fulfill things that seem difficult or unlikely to me? His patient faith, particularly when he saw nothing concrete makes me want to really measure up to his example.

What is my current faith challenge? Can Abram encourage me to trust God in this?

Hagar — Genesis 16, John 14:9



Rembrandt, Hagar and Ishmael with the Angel in the Desert

Hagar encountered the angel of the Lord in the desert, and many see this figure as the pre-incarnate Christ. It is beautiful to realize that these experiences made her our sister in the faith. As an outsider, a woman, a servant, and a foreigner, how beautiful that he appeared to her, his first such appearance. Her role in Abram and Sarai's story was a result of their lack of confidence in God, yet it was turned to good in her life. We see through her that God meets us in our loneliness and need. He is a comforter.

Hagar encountered “the God who sees me” when she ran away from Abram and Sarah. When sent away again because of problems between Isaac and Ishmael, she went through some of what Israel would later experience—being in the wilderness, fearing death for her son, lacking water and having it provided, encountering God in the desert, and having God with her as she raised her child.

Hagar is an ironic figure – an Egyptian woman rejected by the father of faith, and maligned as the ancestress of today's Arabs. It seems fair to also recognize her as a believer, one of many non-Jews who would come to faith in Abraham's God. Her personal experience of faith is an encouragement to any of us who feel like outsiders, marginalized or minimized in some way. To God, she mattered.

Have I grasped how much I matter to God, no matter what my story?

Circumcision — Genesis 17, Colossians 2:11



Rembrandt van Rijn, Detail from sacrifice of Isaac

Circumcision was a mark of the covenant relationship between Abraham and God, and paralleled Christ's ability to cut away sin. It also highlights how important the promise of descendants, and of a Descendant, was for God's people. This promise of great honor shows us God's desire to honor those who follow him. Repeated exhortations to circumcise ones' heart and to allow the love of God to grow are followed by New Testament admonitions that this inward reality matters more than any outward sign.

God changed both Abraham and Sarah's names to raise them to greater honor as the "father of nations" and as a "princess." They were promised that kings would be among their descendants, clearly fulfilled throughout Israel's history, but most fully with Christ the King. That God appeared to Abraham, talked, and left him, implies a visible form, but it was still a stretch of faith to accept the promise of many descendants when he had no child. We have the greater gift of Christ incarnate, risen from the dead, but Abraham's struggle to believe is also our struggle.

In our time, baptism is the outward sign of our inward faith. This washing away of our sins brings us into God's family, now not merely a literal lineage, but a chance for anyone to be adopted. I am God's child by faith--what an astonishing identity?

Do I daily claim my place as God's much loved child?

Sarah — Genesis 18, Luke 1:30-33



Marc Chagall, Abraham and the three angels

Sarah prefigures Mary, the mother of Christ, in receiving from angels the promise of a child. The mystery of a tiny baby growing in its mother's womb is full of wonder, and because of Sarah's advanced age, and because of Mary's virginity, the mystery was even greater.

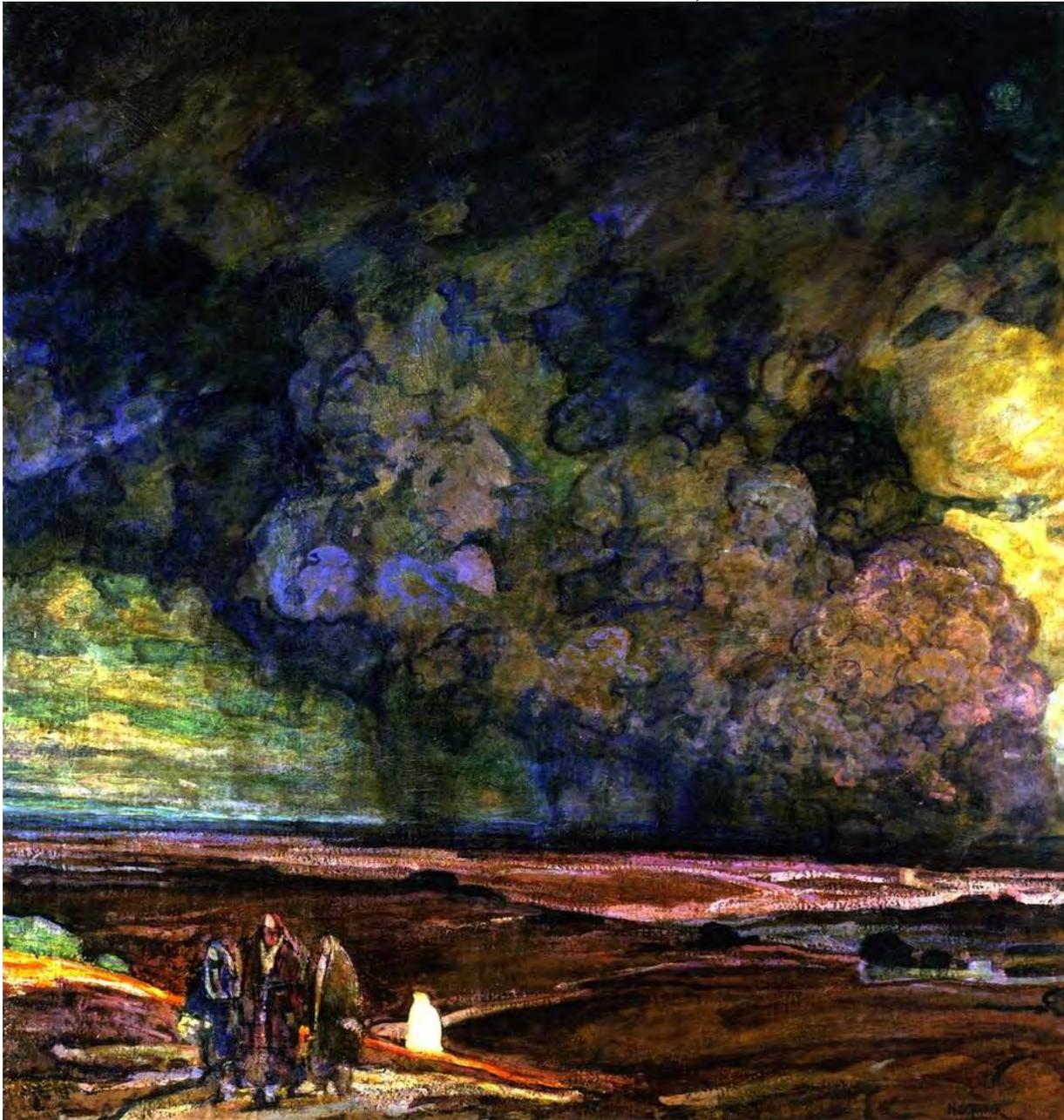
The arrival of the three angels to tell Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son has beautiful symbolism. Artists have used this story to illustrate that the three angels represented the Trinity, the tree under which they sat reminds us of the cross, and the shared meal parallels the Eucharist. The angels brought a message of judgment (Sodom and Gomorrah would be destroyed), and a message of hope (Isaac would be born). The hope, though they could not fully understand it, was also a message of mercy that Christ would come to save from judgment those who responded to him. As Abraham plead for mercy, he also prefigured Christ.

Mary did not react with skeptical laughter and disbelief to the angel's announcement as did Sarah, but with curiosity about the impossibility of bearing a

child as a virgin. The joy of receiving a miracle child was true for each of them. The promise seemed hilariously unlikely to Sarah, and surely most of us can identify with her cheerful skepticism. But God's response to Sarah encourages us: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" as does his response to Mary: "For nothing is impossible with God."

What impossible thing am I asking of God?

Sodom and Gomorrah — Genesis 19, Luke 17:28-30



Henry Ossawa Tanner, Sodom and Gomorrah

God's messengers who rescued Lot from Sodom and Gomorrah prefigured Christ rescuing people from judgment. The angels show us that God accompanies us from destruction to safety. Christ compared the last judgment to the destruction of these towns, but there is a mysterious future hope for these cities. He said that because people were not responding to his message and his miracles, Sodom would be treated better than them in the final judgment.

Christ also used the story of Sodom and Gomorrah as an exhortation to be alert, aware, and ready to flee from danger. He told us to compare ourselves to Lot's wife who died by looking back with longing for her old life. We are exhorted to let go of the past.

Tragically, Lot's daughters felt their chances to marry were minimal, perhaps thinking most of civilization was gone, and so chose to become pregnant by their inebriated father. The descendants of the children of this incest, Moab and Ammon, became Israel's enemies. In the midst of this disheartening story we are reminded that God listened to Abraham's request and kept Lot safe. His prayer of negotiation in the previous chapter had an effect, which encourages us to ask for safety and rescue for ourselves and those we care about, even when they are living disobedient or disorderly lives.

Archaeologists have excavated two sites near the Dead Sea that came to an abrupt end, perhaps through earthquakes at about this time period. Nothing remains but stones and bones and many natural pillars of salt. But the ruins could have been familiar to later generations who adopted a not uncommon narrative of an inhospitable and rich city that was destroyed for its evil ways. Ezekiel 16:49 identifies Sodom's sins as "pride, gluttony, and laziness, while the poor and needy suffered outside her door." That brings the story uncomfortably close to the sins of our cities today.

How has God shown me mercy and rescued me from danger? Do I see a warning in this story for contemporary injustices?

Isaac vs. Ishmael — Genesis 20, 21, Galatians 4:22-23



Rembrandt van Rijn, Abraham sending away Hagar and Ishmael

As Paul wrote, Isaac was born as the fulfillment of God's promise, and he compares those of us who believe in Christ as promised children like Isaac. This imagery then sets up his illustration of Sarah as representing the heavenly Jerusalem (grace) and Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, as representing Mount Sinai (law).

Before Isaac's birth, Abraham and Sarah repeated their lie about their relationship that allowed her to be taken into a king's harem. But God was merciful in

protecting her, remaining faithful to his own promise which their sinfulness could not undo. Isaac was born at God's appointed time.

To think sympathetically of Ishmael who was set to one side in favor of Isaac, we can see him as an outcast, a character type recurrent in the scriptures (e.g. Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David.) An important part of the theme is that the outcast encounters God in his loneliness away from family. As Ishmael suffered the rejection from his father, wandering aimlessly in the desert, water gone, mother crying, he was dying, he experienced an overwhelming accumulation of trauma. Here God shows us he will be present to us in our depression and fear, and provide for us when we have nothing.

God heard the boy's cries and he promised that Ishmael would live and have many descendants. Ishmael foreshadows Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. Hagar was shown a well that saved their lives, the water prefiguring the Spirit. The story ends with a comment on Ishmael's growth as a talented archer and the marriage his mother arranged. Later we are told he had twelve sons who became the leaders of twelve tribes, and he lived to 137 years of age. Some measure of reconciliation between Ishmael and Isaac is implied since they came together to bury Abraham.

Despite Abraham and Sarah's times of unbelief that led to bad decisions, and painful human relationships, they received the promised child who was not only an ancestor of Christ, but who foreshadowed his life. The joy of fulfillment once more gave laughter, now joyful laughter, not skeptical laughter, and that is what Isaac's name means. I, too, can identify with laughter prompted by a fulfilled dream. The more unlikely the outcome, the more joyful the response.

Do I celebrate being a promised child of God?

Isaac's Resurrection — Genesis 22, John 19:16-18



John August Swanson, Isaac



Marc Chagall, The Beauty of Holiness

Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac reflects God the Father's sacrifice of his son, Christ. Twice God referred to Isaac as Abraham's beloved son, a term that God would use for Christ at his baptism. This is also the first time the word love is used in scripture, as God acknowledged that Abraham loved Isaac so much.

This is a difficult story: 1) why God would command human sacrifice, 2) why would Abraham consent, 3) and why would Isaac cooperate? In pagan cultures human sacrifice was common, so why not stand clearly against it? The story ends with God himself taking that stand, and the substitution of a ram for Isaac makes a very clear analogy to the substitution of Christ for us. God will suffer and die in our

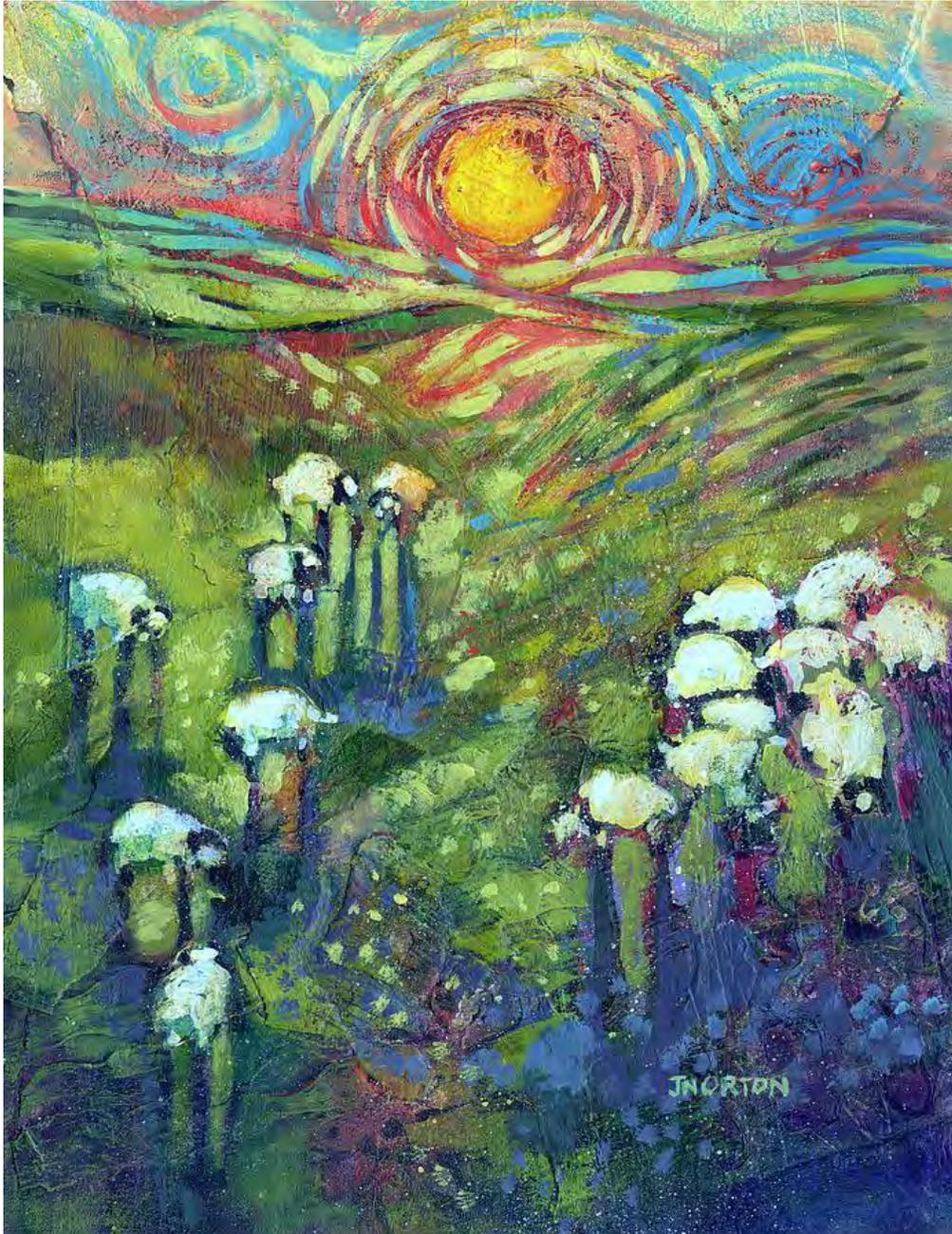
place. Perhaps since sacrifice of children was such a cultural commonplace, a dramatic proof of God's protection was needed to counter the pattern.

Hebrews 11 tells us Abraham had faith in God's promise, and a hope of resurrection. Isaac, in his obedient walk up the hill, carrying the wood for the sacrifice, is a poignant parallel to Christ carrying his wooden cross without any resistance to the death and suffering coming to him. As the story begins, God calls Abraham to go to a mountain in the land of Moriah, the place the Jerusalem temple will be built, intensifying the symbolic importance of this story in light of Christ's sacrifice. That Isaac did not die in this story but lived on to old age prefigured Christ's resurrection.

This story meant a great deal to me at a moment in my life where I felt I had to let go of something, and yet that letting go felt like the most horrible sacrifice imaginable. The story helped me believe that if I let go, my sacrifice could come back to me in a resurrected form. Soren Kierkegaard used this story as an example of how we are called to a leap of faith. Annie Lamont credits her conversion to reading Kierkegaard's reflection. This difficult story touches something deep within us, even because of our questions. In my case, I did receive the resurrection hoped for after many years, and so feel a tender affection for the story and the characters in it.

What sacrifices has God called me to make that have been beyond my abilities?

The Promised Land — Genesis 23, Hebrews 11:13-16



Jan Norton, Flock in the Promised Land

The land God promised to Abraham prefigured the Kingdom of God that Christ brought. Just as the promise was not fully realized for Abraham, we live in a time of tension when the Kingdom has begun but is not fully realized. Seeing how God fulfilled his promises to Abraham helps us believe God is at work to fulfill his promises to us. His guarantees are good.

Abraham purchased a burial plot after Sarah died. It is touching that he left her body and asked for the land, identifying himself as a stranger in a foreign land. This grave and a well he had dug were all he personally possessed of the promised land. Remarkably, Abraham's descendants did own the land starting about 500 years after him, and held it for another 1500 years. It is even more remarkable that after a nearly 2000-year gap, his descendants are once more on the land.

In their time, the places the patriarchs made camp were probably oasis areas. There was a mix of forest and desert when Israel lived on the land, but it was later deforested. Today 7% of the country has been reforested in an impressive effort of creation care, and 20% of the country has been protected as nature reserves. A 4000 year old promise is viable today.

Abraham had a present experience and a future promise of a homeland. We also look forward to a heavenly homeland even when enjoying life and/or suffering with our earthly problems. Our lives are a mix of sorrow and happiness, and the cross and resurrection are simultaneous realities for us in this in-between time when the Kingdom is "already" and "not yet." But many have applied the notion of a promised land to ministry calls in our lives today. It may not be large, but each of us have a place to be part of our own kingdom-building project.

What is my personal promised land?

Rebekah — Genesis 24, Ephesians 5:22-23



Rembrandt van Rijn, Rebekah gives water to Eliezer

Rebekah prefigures the church as the bride of Christ. In using analogies to read this story, Abraham is like the Father, Isaac the Son, and the servant sent for Rebekah is like the Holy Spirit. The servant drew her away from her world and took her to the Son, completing imagery of the church as the bride of Christ. Our own marriages bear this same imagery as we are brought together with a spouse. Deeper yet, God is like our spouse.

Perhaps Abraham already had hope Rebekah could be a spouse for his son, having gotten word about her birth and that of her siblings. The beauty of the story is that God himself orchestrated the encounter, answering the servant's prayer for guidance and for a sign of who God himself had selected. He repeatedly spoke of the quest for a wife in terms of God's purpose and destiny: he asked that she be the one God had appointed, the one the Lord intended him to meet, and expressed gratitude for being led along the right path.

Once he found Rebekah, he described it as a successful mission. With this strong sense of destiny, Rebekah was willing to leave her family and go to a strange place. The happy ending: Isaac loved her very much and she was a great comfort to him.

This story comforts me as a parent, showing another parent who desired an appropriate partner and a happy wholesome marriage for his child. It demonstrates that God himself cares about this and works to bring marriage partners together through answered prayer and meaningful encounters. The story encourages me to pray with faith and hope for the many young single people in my life.

Do I trust God in the area of romantic love and marriage?

A New Generation — Genesis 25, Romans 4:16



Rembrandt van Rijn, Esau selling his birthright to Jacob

Christ called us to a life of faith, making promises that if we pray in faith, we will receive what we ask. Scripture calls Abraham the father of faith, and in his day, he was unique in his intense life of faith. As promised, before he died, Abraham had more children and so did become the father of many nations. Some of his descendants would become Israel's enemies. It is sobering that so many of Abraham's descendants did not follow him in his faith.

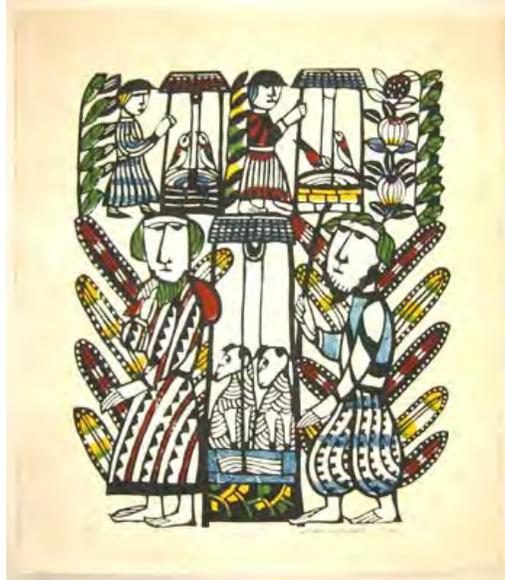
Isaac, the heir to Abraham's faith, already had significant spiritual experiences: not dying at Mount Moriah and the providential finding of his wife. He now had faith to pray for a child and was answered with twins twenty years into marriage. (Such long delays!) Rebekah had faith to ask God why the twins were struggling within her and to receive a prophecy regarding their futures. One cannot help but wonder if conflicts between their sons created tensions in the marriage. Rebekah's solution was to later deceive her husband to make the prophecy she had received come true, whereas Isaac may have been more willing to let life unfold and pray in faith.

The twins themselves, Jacob and Esau, started out with very little evidence of faith. Jacob manipulated his brother and gained a financial advantage, and Esau did not care. But their subsequent stories tell how both slowly came to faith in God, and their lives changed, an encouragement with anyone dealing with wayward children.

As the story moves forward, the number of heroes of faith increases. Now, since Christ has come, there are millions, perhaps even billions, living out lives of faith in their unique contexts, true children of Abraham. Today we have the same struggles of passing faith to our children, not forcing it on them, but allowing them to learn from their own experiences. If they aren't interested, or reject the faith, or live troubled lives, we may be tempted to manipulate them like Rebekah. But we know it is better to pray, to take the long view, and ask God to call our children to himself.

Do I trust God with the lives of those close to me?

Isaac — Genesis 26, Matthew 5:9



Isaac's Well, Sadeo Watanabe

Isaac foreshadowed Christ's role as he worked for peace, a role he has given to all of us. As we have seen, Isaac's life was like Christ's in many ways. He was a promised and long-awaited child whose birth had miraculously overcome human limitations. He went through a death and resurrection experience on Mount Moriah. Now he received an appearance from God and a reiteration of the promises to Abraham regarding many descendants and ownership of the land.

He was also a fragile human who did not always live a life of faith. This is the third time we see the motif of the beautiful wife being desired by a king, and God interfering to protect the couple for whom he has an important destiny. Scripture does not hide the foibles of its heroes, and here Isaac repeats his parents' errors.

In this chapter we also see his character as a peacemaker. Like his father, he became a rich man. Unlike his father, he did so through agriculture. His neighbors maliciously filled up the wells he inherited from his father, and he lost his agricultural land because the Philistines were jealous of him. He struggled to survive against his surrounding neighbors, and yet continued to be committed to peace. Isaac was on the land God had promised him, but conflict forced him to move six times. He accepted this opposition patiently, and continued to look for water, fully trusting the promise that he and his family belonged on this land promised to him and his father, and receiving yet another reiteration of the promise that caused him to worship God.

Eventually the very ruler who had ordered Isaac to leave the country came to him and said it was clear that God was blessing him. They made a treaty and Isaac sent him home in peace. That very day Isaac's servants once more found water, made a new well, and he found rest in the land. Isaac exemplifies the beatitude as a peacemaker whose patience and meekness resulted in receiving God's blessing.

I need to ask myself: Am I patient and willing to lose when opposed or rejected? Am I willing to forgive and reconcile when others are willing to restore a broken relationship? Do I have the faith that God will set difficulties right?

Am I a peacemaker as God calls me to be?

Jacob — Genesis 27-28, Romans 9:11-12



Dream of Jacob, John August Swanson

Jacob, though called by God to bless all people, was deceitful, troubled, and skeptical. It took a personal encounter with Christ to change him. When Christ appeared to him in a dream, Jacob did not yet have the faith of his parents or grandparents. Despite his lack of faith, he was promised land, descendants, and the role of blessing all people. Jacob's story encourages us that God does not give up on us when we make mistakes, but he continues to find ways to encounter us and speak to us.

Jacob offered a conditional response, much like so many of us today, thinking we will believe in this God if he does good things for us. When Jacob returned to this same place after many years, God once more met him there, changed his name to Israel, and at that point Jacob came to personal faith. In the New Testament passage it is clear that God had a special calling for him and persisted in pursuing him until he believed.

As he left home, fleeing from his angry brother, Jacob camped out and saw a vision of angels ascending and descending on a ladder, something Christ referenced in John 1 as a promise to Nathanael, a potential disciple. After his vision, Jacob named the place Bethel, "house of God" which reminds us that all of creation is God's house, not just our churches. We may encounter the creator as we are camping out as Jacob did. Our experience of awe may not involve a vision, but with Jacob, we may realize we have unexpectedly encountered God.

When have I encountered God in dreams or in the outdoors?

January 25
Rachel — Genesis 29, Matthew 2:17-18



Rembrandt van Rijn, Jacob and Rachel

Rachel, who married Jacob, later gave birth to Joseph. Since Joseph clearly foreshadows Christ in character and experience, this makes her parallel to Christ's mother, Mary. Rachel died in childbirth with Benjamin and was buried at Bethlehem. Many years later Mary came to that same place to give birth to Christ.

When Rachel and Jacob met, he was at the lowest point in his life. His deceptive attempt to gain wealth and honor had backfired, and he was desperate, insecure, anxious, alone, uncertain of his future. In his refugee experience, he needed a new job, a new place to live, and new people in his life. His encounter with beautiful Rachel, being welcomed by her, falling in love with her, and being able to marry were a gift of grace. We, too, are blessed when God gives us the grace of a loving partner. For Jacob and Rachel we see how comforting a loving marriage can be, but for her sister Leah we see the sadness of marriage without love, and yet her wisdom in turning to God for that missing love.

When Rachel gave birth to Benjamin it should have been a moment of joy, but it became a source of sorrow. Rachel's death reminds us of the scourge of maternal deaths in childbirth. She thus becomes a reminder of this all too common source of suffering.

The prophecy of Rachel weeping for her children looks ahead to Herod's slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem in his quest to eradicate the threat of a rival King. One can imagine Rachel grieving over the suffering of her people throughout the centuries. During the Holocaust, a poet wrote a lament and called on Rachel:

What do I require of you?
I ask that you wake from their sleep
Our mother Rachel
And the saint of Berdichev
And that the three of you go together before God.
You will thunder and demand
Rachel will weep and plead
And Levi Yitzhak will argue his lawsuit. Proclaiming
—If, Lord of the Universe, you will not be Savior
Of Living Jews,
You will, God forbid, be the Savior of Corpses. — Simkhe Bunem Shavevitsh

Do I share the sufferings of those in my life?

The Family — Genesis 30, Matthew 6:7-8



Michelangelo, Leah

Does God answer prayer? Christ said he does, but not because we say the magic words. In Jacob's family jealousy and hurt between two sisters who struggled for their husband's attention and approval was centered around the birth of children. They added two servant girls as wives and the result was twelve boys and one girl, and a lot of sibling rivalry.

Both women seemed to believe in the efficacy of a mandrake root to become pregnant. The plant contains hallucinogens, can be shaped like a small person, and they have had ritual magic uses from ancient times to the present. It must have

been a wake-up call for them that the one that did not have the mandrake root is the one who got pregnant.

Their father also depended on divination and revered idols. Jacob's techniques for increasing the kind of animals he wanted seems magical as well. Perhaps he thought he was being scientific, but in the next chapter God appeared to him and took credit for increasing his flocks in an act of justice. Abraham's brother's family seemed immersed in magical thinking, and Jacob fit right in.

Three pregnancies are described as God's answer to prayer: Rebekah, and now Leah and Rachel receive children as a gift from God. Perhaps God was trying to teach them the contrast between magic and prayer to a living God. We, too, can fall into magical thinking, supposing if we just offer the right formula we will get what we want. Instead, learning to truly trust God comes from a combination of waiting for answers and receiving answers. The waiting can be long and painful, but we are encouraged to keep asking.

Do I believe prayer is a worthwhile exercise even when I am not getting the answer I want?

Laban — Genesis 31, Mark 10:42-45



Rembrandt van Rijn, Laban greets Jacob

In addition to finding analogies to Christ in characters, we find characters who fail to carry the image of Christ, such as Laban, who is an example of a leader corrupted

by selfishness. In contrast, Christ's concept of leadership is one of service, caring for others and liberating them. Laban is also an example of a poor father—his daughters obviously resented being sold as his property. In contrast, God is the image of the perfectly caring, compassionate and protective father. God watched over Jacob and his family and protected them from Laban just as he does for us.

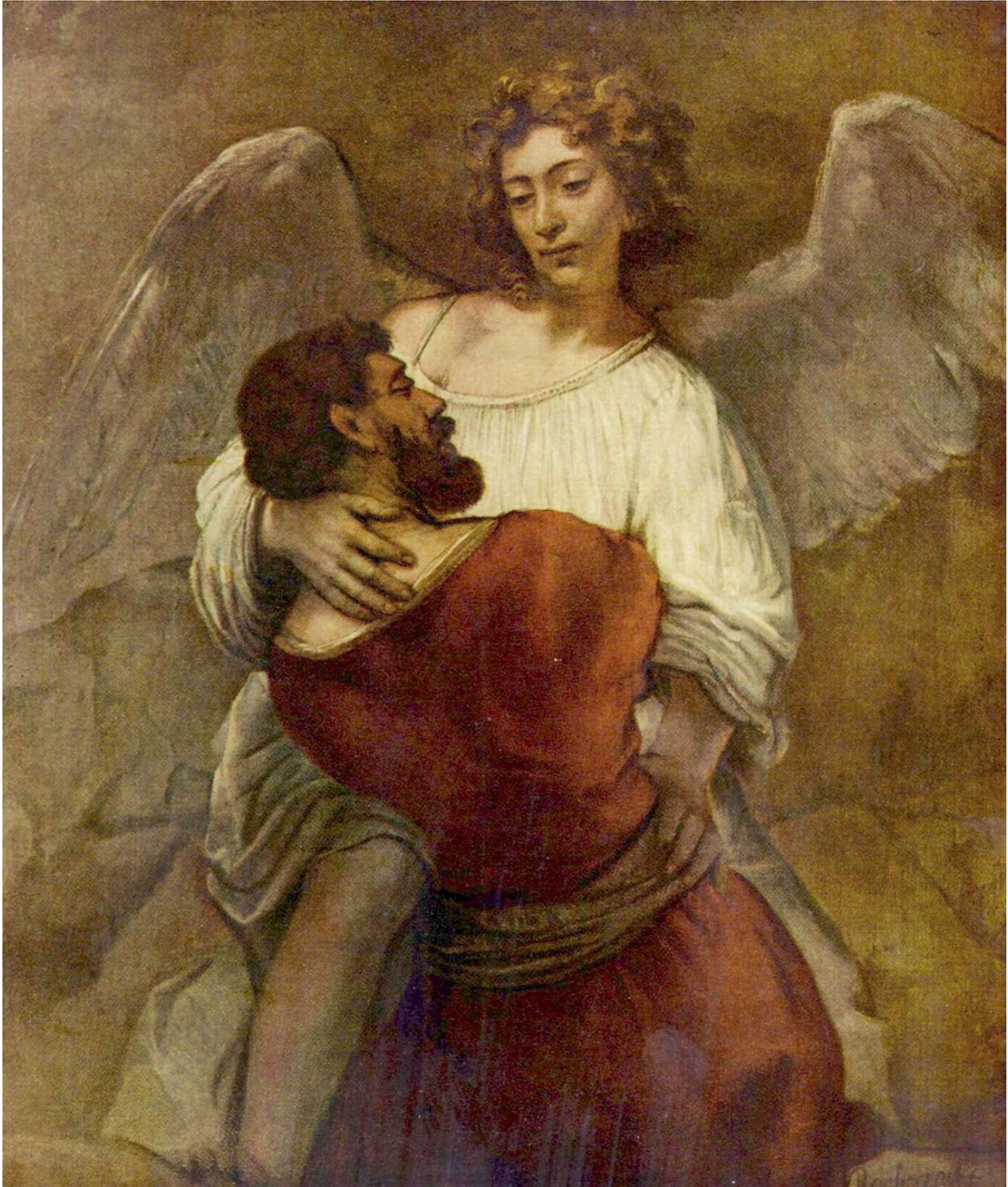
Untrustworthy, disagreeable and unjust, Laban made agreements with Jacob and broke them. He agreed to the marriage with Rachel and then at the last minute substituted Leah, thus ensuring unhappiness for this less loved wife. He made exploitative agreements, and Jacob plaintively complained that he had changed his wages ten times, and that God is the one who made sure he did not go away empty-handed.

Jacob and family left at night, whereupon Laban chased him and arrived full of accusations, insisting that Jacob stole from him, arguing that everything was his: daughters, children and flocks. They solved their differences by agreeing to stay away from one another and setting up a boundary marker.

In contrast, Christ-like leadership gives generously, tells the truth, blesses, respects, and shows sacrificial love. How different from claiming everything. Perhaps we can (unfortunately) recognize these difficult family conflicts in our own experience or others we care about. The tensions in families, the tensions over money, and tensions that lead to not speaking to one another can be extremely painful. Christ's caring love that is kind and patient is our call.

Do I have broken or painful family relationships that need prayer?

Jacob Encounters God — Genesis 32, Matthew 5:8



Rembrandt van Rijn, Jacob wrestling with the angel

As Jacob returned to his homeland and waited in fear to see his brother, he wrestled with an unknown figure who changed his name to Israel. That figure has

been identified as a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ. Jacob, who did not find faith easy, acknowledged he had seen God and remained alive. Here we see a God who lets us struggle with him. Arguing with him as we might with a friend is allowed. This is a level of sincerity we can compare to purity of heart.

Frightened of his brother, Jacob's prayer reminds me of some of my own: "God, I am trying to please you and obey you, and I know I do not deserve anything, but I thank you for your provisions, and I need your protection. I have fears, but I am trying to trust your promises." In many ways, very self-centered praying. Jacob sent gifts to Esau, hoping he would be friendly, reminding me of my tendencies to try to manipulate others. Then came the wrestling match.

In Fredrick Buechner's sermon on Jacob, he wrote of the wrestling match as a time when the stubborn willfulness of Jacob's life was broken, making a place for something new: "He merely touches the hollow of Jacob's thigh, and in a moment Jacob is lying there crippled and helpless. The sense we have, which Jacob must have had, that the whole battle was from the beginning fated to end this way, that the stranger had simply held back until now, letting Jacob exert all his strength and almost win so that when he was defeated, he would know that he was truly defeated; so that he would know that not all the shrewdness, will, brute force that he could muster were enough to get this. Jacob will not release his grip, only now it is a grip not of violence but of need, like the grip of a drowning man."

I ask myself if my self-will has been broken and if I have come face to face with the depths of my need for God. The answer appears to be that this is something that must happen more than once. The struggle continues.

In what ways am I wrestling with God?

Esau — Genesis 33, 36, Matthew 18:21-22



Peter Paul Rubens, The Reconciliation of Esau and Jacob

Esau showed the forgiveness that Christ requires from us. When he and Jacob reconciled, Jacob compared his friendly smile to God's face. God is at work in our lives to bring reconciliation to broken relationships. He is the God of peace.

We recall Esau as the one who impulsively sold his birthright to his twin, Jacob, and was the victim of deception. Logically so, since these interpretations are in the New Testament and are legitimate analogies. His selling the birthright is used as a warning that there comes a time when it is too late to repent.

Jacob fled and when the time came to return, he sent a message hoping for a friendly reaction from Esau. He became understandably anxious when he heard Esau was coming with 400 armed men. Jacob prayed, sent livestock as gifts, wrestled with the angel, and lined up his family in order of his preferences. When Esau ran to meet him and embraced him affectionately, they both cried. All the past bitterness was wiped away in forgiveness.

At first Esau's nation, Edom, was the more successful one while Jacob's descendants went into slavery. Genesis 36 gives us elaborate detail on Esau's descendants, showing his importance as founder of one of the many nations as Abraham's grandson. Eight kings ruled before there were kings in Israel. Descendants of Esau's grandson Amalek became particularly cruel enemies and God pronounced a judgment on them which David carried out. Kinship was not enough to get the Israelites permission to pass through Edom on their way out of the desert, but they were reminded to care about them as their relatives. The prophecy that the elder would serve the younger was finally fulfilled under King David who dominated Edom.

Tensions in families separated by grudges and resentments can be so painful. Growth in both Jacob and Esau enabled them to let their bitter past together go, and they reconciled, and later came together to bury their father. The story reminds us that forgiveness and reconciliation can happen even after years of estrangement. The tears of relief, gratitude, and joy remind us that there may be deep love hidden by the distance.

Have I experienced a long-delayed reconciliation for which I am grateful, or am I praying for such a reconciliation where there is still painful separation and hurt?

The Troubled Family — Genesis 34, 35, Acts 3:19



The Death of Rachel c. 1847 | Gustav Ferdinand Metz
Public Domain | Wikimedia Commons

Jacob's family made huge mistakes, offended and harmed others, just as the church of Christ has managed to do through the centuries. Rather than being a blessing to others as promised, they killed others, something which is a painful part of Christian history as well. Jacob's family was supposed to be an image of God to the world and failed; we are supposed to be an image of Christ to the world and our failures today and in the past are obvious. Just as he did with Jacob's family, God can use us for good despite these failures. Our past does not determine what God can do.

Nor was Jacob's family immune to tragedy. Living in Shechem, having bought some property, daughter Dinah wanted friends. Perhaps allowed to be too independent, she became a victim of date rape. Jacob considered allowing a marriage with her abuser, but two of her full brothers, also Leah's children, decided

revenge was best. They became like violent gang members, killing most all in the rival gang. At the end of his life Jacob called these sons men of violence.

Jacob urged his family to destroy idols, which they buried in Shechem. They moved to Bethel and worshipped God, marking the place where he had received kingdom promises: the land would belong to his descendants and there would be kings among them. It was reiterated that his new name was Israel which means “one who struggles with God.”

A day’s travel south, Rachel tragically died in childbirth at Bethlehem. Another family tragedy, Reuben’s sexual relationship with his father’s wife Bildad, caused Jacob to disown him as his firstborn. Another day’s travel south brought Jacob to his father in Hebron. He was there again when his father died, and together with Esau they buried Isaac.

Reading about things going wrong in Jacob’s family awakens compassion for any families who suffer these things today: rape, forced marriages, a child becoming violent, family involved in occult practices, death of a wife in childbirth, incest, death of parents... It seemed unlikely that good could come from this family, but we know that by grace, it did.

Are their painful things in my family history that need redemption?

Dreams — Genesis 37, Hebrews 12:1-3



Rembrandt van Rijn, Joseph tells his dreams to Jacob

Joseph's story of going from favored son, to rejection, to honor serves as a parable for Christ's life and work on our behalf. Joseph's extraordinary character is far

above that of his quarreling, killing, womanizing family. Jacob had deeply wronged his brother and had to flee for his life. Joseph's brothers went much farther, selling him as a slave out of their jealousy. The price, twenty pieces of silver, reminds us of Judas' betrayal of Jesus. Joseph's bloody coat foreshadows Christ's robe at the cross.

His story serves to challenge us who often have dreams and hopes that we think come from God, but which may be questioned or mocked by others. In Joseph's case, we know these dreams eventually came true, but I cannot help but speculate about his emotions. When his brothers put him in a well, potentially facing death, in that dark place his dreams surely felt meaningless, confusing, and difficult to interpret. Most of us doubtless experience times of shattered dreams and fear and anxiety and disappointment. We are not told how Joseph survived this, only given his inspiring example to know that he did.

The level of rejection I have experienced has been extremely painful, but truthfully, it has been minor compared to Joseph's experience. I have longed for transformation in alienated relationships, and I cannot help but wonder how much painful but hopeful longing Joseph experienced. His heart was obviously tender when it became clear his brothers were ready for reconciliation, but how often he must have recalled their rejection through the years and thought how hopeless reconciliation would be. His story helps us realize that God is still with us in dark, disappointing times, and it makes more sense to hope in him than to give up in despair.

Do I have dreams that have been dashed that I need to put into God's hands?

Judah — Genesis 38, Matthew 20:27-28



Marc Chagall, Tamar Daughter-in-law of Judah

Judah prefigures Christ's willingness to suffer for others, something that did not occur until late in his life. Judah's grandson became King David's ancestor and through him came Christ. Judah's example assures us that God can redeem bad choices. He can change our future.

Judah started badly. He instigated selling Joseph into slavery, a particularly cruel and jealous reaction that parallels the betrayal of Christ. He abandoned his daughter-in-law Tamar, who then seduced him incognito. He was outraged when she became pregnant and had a double-standard that he could have sex outside of marriage but she could not. He then recognized his sin, and out of this relationship

tainted with incest came an ancestor of Christ—always mysterious, redemptive grace at work.

When Judah and his brothers went to Egypt, he had begun to change. He fought to keep Benjamin out of prison and acknowledged his mistreatment of Joseph. He offered himself as a replacement for Benjamin. The old sin of selling Joseph was so far redeemed that Judah became an image of Christ, offering his life for his brother.

When Leah gave birth to Judah, her suffering had taught her dependence on God and she named him “praise.” He was the fourth child, but in his father’s final blessings he was honored with a promise of authority. This would be fulfilled in all the descendants of King David, including Christ.

This story of redemption encourages any of us who have failed that there is always hope. Grace is always available, and the end can always be greater than the middle of the story. There is no reason to live in depression about the past, but to repent as needed, and look to the future with hope and joy.

Can I celebrate ways I have seen dramatic redemption in my life or that of others?

Joseph's suffering — Genesis 39, 40, Philippians 2:5-8



Rembrandt van Rijn, Joseph accused by Potipher's wife

Joseph's life foreshadows Christ's betrayal, death, resurrection, and glory. Both suffered, were imprisoned, and were raised to honor. Both compassionately forgave their brothers and were the means of saving them. Their stories assure us that God is with us in our suffering.

The Psalmist wrote that until the time came to fulfill his dreams, Joseph's character was being tested. Under difficult circumstances as a slave and in prison he worked hard and was promoted to leadership positions. In both cases it says his bosses had no more worries, and everything ran smoothly. He further remained honorable in the face of attempted seduction and accepted the set-back that resulted.

Joseph's excellence in terrible jobs challenges each one of us to do our very best even if our jobs are not what we would prefer. If we trust, we can be like Joseph where God gave him success in everything, caused him to become a favorite, and enabled him to bless his employers. God was with him and gave him wisdom, a reassuring promise for us in our troubles.

Joseph even endured the disappointment of not having his case taken to Pharaoh by the chief cupbearer. For two more years he simply continued to do his job. At God's providential moment, the door to freedom would open for him.

This is true faith. Accepting what is, doing our part, not complaining when being treated unfairly, and continuing to live in hope. It is the quality we see in Christ in his incarnation, the same attitude we are called to have.

Do I stay strong in faith, trusting God even when my circumstances are difficult?

Joseph raised to honor — Genesis 41, Philippians 2:9-11



Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, Pharaoh gives his ring to Joseph

When Joseph was raised to honor, this prefigured Christ in his resurrection and ascension. Joseph was made second in command, similar to Christ at God's right hand. Joseph prophetically shared God's word, as did Christ. His confidence that he could hear from God was borne out by what followed.

Joseph was taken to Pharaoh to interpret several disturbing dreams, something that only could have happened because of his kindness to the cupbearer in prison. The coming economic crisis needed a wise person to manage it and Joseph suggested Pharaoh find the wisest man available. Pharaoh concluded that Joseph was that man. He thus began his public role at thirty years of age, the same age as Christ, who was also the wisest man in the land. When the seven years of abundance ended and famine began, Joseph was in a position to provide bread for the hungry, one of Christ's roles as well.

In Stephen's masterful summary of history from Abraham to Solomon, he said that God gave Joseph unusual wisdom. Even Pharaoh recognized that he was filled with God's Spirit. This is the first use of this important idea which eventually becomes available to every believer in the New Testament.

In applying Joseph's example to ourselves, we want to be like him, so filled with the Spirit and unusual wisdom that it is obvious to unbelievers. We want to be in a position where we have bread, literal and spiritual, to freely share with those around us.

Have I asked for God's Spirit to fill me, to enable me to wisely feed those around me?

Joseph's Reconciliation — Genesis 42-45, I Peter 2:24



Joseph Bergler the Younger, Joseph and his brothers

Joseph's brothers are like us, guilty, subject to death, fearful, in need of redemption and forgiveness. Joseph offered forgiveness, foreshadowing Christ's role for us. They were hungry and needed provision, and they were estranged and needed reconciliation.

At first Joseph was rough; he accused and imprisoned them. He put them through a series of difficulties to test them. He had lived for many years with success at work and happiness with his wife and children, and claimed to have forgotten his family when he named his first son. It must have been a shock when his brothers stood before him. The last time he had seen them they were planning to kill him and ended up selling him into slavery.

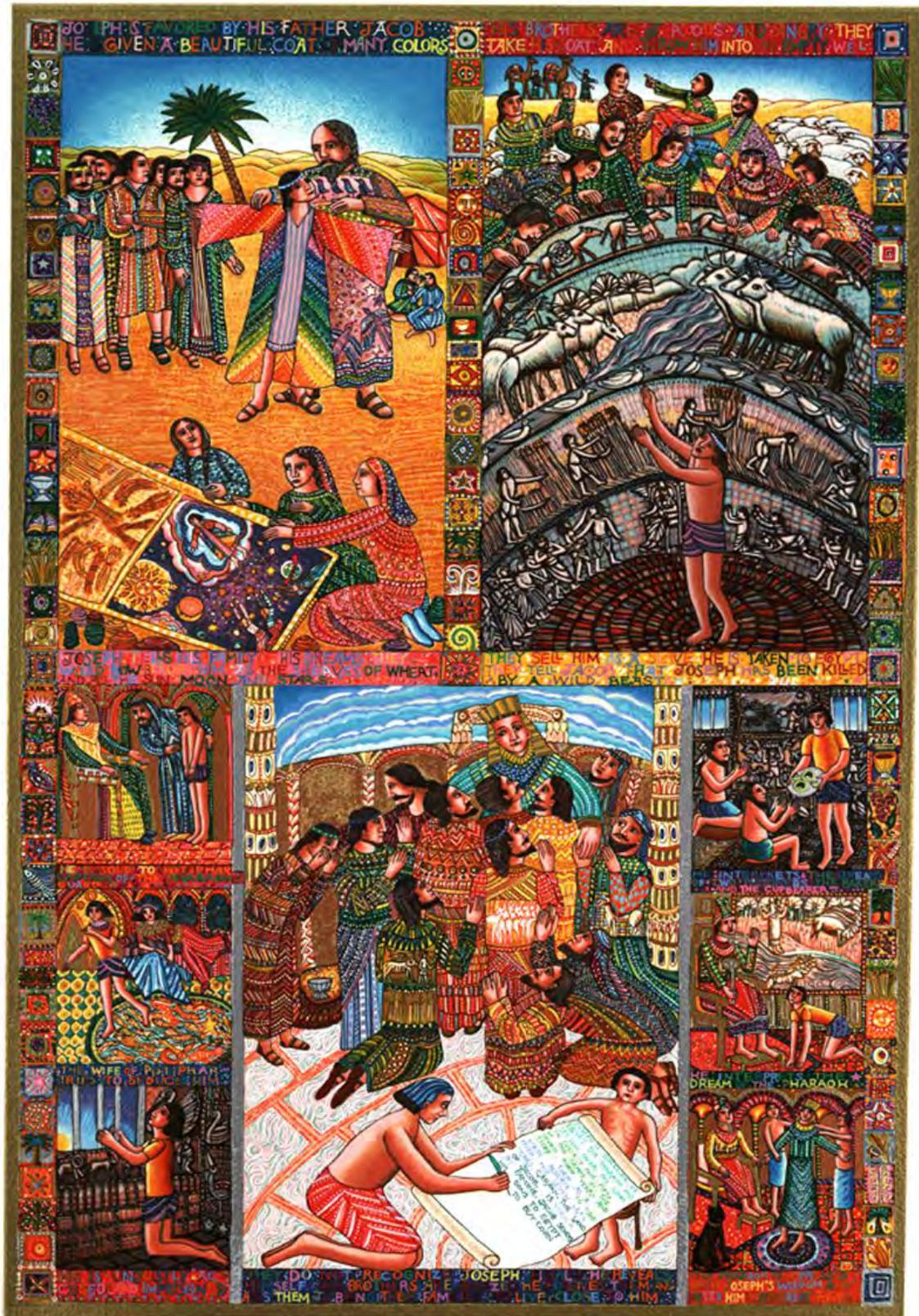
On a human level we can sympathize that their arrival forced him to face his past traumatic relationship with them. Step by step Joseph grieved, crying repeatedly, with the result that his trauma was healed and replaced with kindness and forgiveness. For the brothers, also, this allowed them to grieve and repent of their

treatment of Joseph, to confess their guilt, and to try to make amends. When Joseph revealed himself to them, he went so far as to say it was God who sent him to Egypt, not them, with the good purpose of preserving their lives.

Few of us have experienced the level of Joseph's trauma, but whatever trauma we have experienced, the example of grieving and forgiving is a model. He had the power to avenge the past, but instead he wept, and slowly opened himself to a new relationship with his brothers and a new positive future together. May we all develop that same tender forgiving heart toward any who have harmed us. God can continue to work on our behalf to restore broken relationships. He understands the depths of our emotional pain, he works to transform us, and turns our sorrow into joy.

Have I asked for and received Christ's healing for any of my traumas?

Joseph's Resurrection — Genesis 46-47, John 11:25-26



Joseph, John August Swanson

For Jacob, who had thought his son was dead for so many years, seeing Joseph was like a resurrection. Like Christ's resurrection, Joseph's work raised the family from near starvation to abundance, from an unsettled life to one rooted in a beautiful place, from dishonor to honor, and from being a small group to becoming a vast people. God restored what had been lost, just as he does for us. He provided creatively and abundantly for them, just as he does for us.

It is touching that when Jacob and Joseph were first reunited they embraced, and Joseph wept on his father's shoulder for a long time. The grief from all the suffering of the lost years together, and the relief of seeing his father again, came flooding out. This was the fifth of seven times we are told that Joseph wept. The first was when he overheard his brothers acknowledging their cruelty to him. The second was when he saw the one brother not involved in harming him, Benjamin. After Judah's offer to take Benjamin's place as a prisoner, Joseph revealed himself to them and his weeping was so intense it could be heard elsewhere in the palace.

His tears of joy flowed as his brothers recognized him and they reconciled with one another. Perhaps his healing was complete when he was once more reunited with his father and he wept away his grief and loss. For seventeen years we hear of no more weeping until the moment his father died. After that, his brothers came humbly and fearfully to ask for his forgiveness and to offer to be his slaves. He wept again, but assured them that he not only forgave, he saw God's hand in all that had happened. He was able to speak kindly to them, a great contrast to his rough speech when they first reappeared in his life.

If we have suffered loss followed by restoration, perhaps we can identify with the intensity of Joseph's emotions. Joseph foreshadows Christ's tender, loving, and forgiving heart, and we are called to have the same heart. We need to be willing to cry when we need to, without shame.

Have I received restoration through the grief of weeping?

Jacob's Blessings — Genesis 48-49, Mark 10:16



Rembrandt van Rijn, Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph

Jacob's prophecies at the end of his life included adoption, promise of Messiah, and repeated promise of blessings. These are blessings the Father also gives us through his Son. In Jacob's first blessings he adopted Joseph's sons as his own into his family and away from Egypt. Thus Ephraim and Manasseh became known as two "half-tribes" of Israel. Further, the younger son was made greater than the older, a theme of grace repeated from Jacob's own life.

Jacob gathered his sons and gave prophecies. He passed over Reuben for having slept with one of his wives, passed over Simeon and Levi for having been murderous to avenge their sister, and he offered authority to the next in line, Judah. He promised that rulership would not depart from Judah until the coming of the one to whom it belongs whom all nations would obey, a prophecy fulfilled in Christ.

For Joseph, however, the prophecy referred to a fountain, perhaps Jacob's well. When Christ arrived at the well Jacob had dug approximately 2000 years earlier, one can see that Jacob's blessing for Joseph prophesied Christ as well.

Joseph

Joseph is a fruitful bough
By a well
God (and Jacob) as Shepherd
God as Rock (cf. Joshua's stone)
Blessings on him who was
separated from his brothers

Acknowledged as the firstborn

Jesus

The vine
Sitting by Jacob's well
The good shepherd
The rock
Separated in death and
restored to them in
resurrection
Firstborn of many

For Joseph the word "blessing" was repeated seven times, reminding us that this is God's desire for us.

Have I learned to give and receive blessings?

Joseph's Forgiveness — Genesis 50, Luke 23:34



Sieger Köder, Depiction of Joseph Reuniting with his brothers

Joseph had Christ's forgiving heart which erased what had been done against him and saw God using his misfortune for a greater purpose. When he revealed himself to his brothers he told them not to be angry with themselves, because it was God who had sent him there ahead of them. After Jacob died the brothers supposed he had been kind to them only for the sake of their father, and they came to Joseph to offer to become his slaves. Joseph told them not to be afraid of him because God had turned into good what they intended for evil.

Joseph's remarkable response teaches us to reinterpret events in our own lives. His brother's actions were cruel and horrifying. God did not cause them to allow their jealousy to become homicidal. Nor was it God who caused them to wait so many

years to beg for forgiveness. But Joseph could see the good that God brought from the evil. God is like a talented novelist who has the end of the plot in mind.

Abraham had been warned that his descendants would remain over 400 years in Egypt. After Joseph's death God seemed to be silent, similar to the 400 years before Christ when prophets no longer spoke. But Genesis ends with a declaration of faith on Joseph's part that God would surely take the people back to the land they had been promised. The New Testament celebrates his faith in asking them to bury him in the land.

Joseph's example gives me several very practical ways of letting God teach me how to think. If someone harms me in some way, I can look for how God turns evil to good. I can be quick to be forgiving and to speak kindly and reassuringly. If God has promised something, I can hold on to it with confident faith.

Have I learned to interpret my life through the lens of God's sovereignty?