

July 19, 2020
Drinking from the Well of Living Water
Genesis 11:31-12:9

Those of you who know me, know I love geography. I love mountains, glaciers, lakes, and strange things like pingos, tomboles, and nunataks. And I love maps. Maps are among the coolest human inventions ever ...

So when I come to the book of Genesis, I have this fortunate (or unfortunate) habit of looking at the maps. I'm sure you do, too. Because maps are so awesome. So I'm looking at Terah, Abraham's father, setting out from a city called "Ur of the Chaldees" (no one knows exactly where that is) heading for Canaan (what we know today as Israel). But he and his family, for some reason stop part way, in the region of Haran (now SE Turkey).

After Terah's passing, God commands Abraham to leave his family (a rather unheard-of thing in that culture) and keep on going to Canaan, 800 kms south (Lethbridge to Kamloops). This was on foot, of course, with livestock, so it probably took at 4-8 weeks. At Shechem, considered the centre of Canaan, Abraham built an altar and the Lord appeared to Abram and said, *"To your offspring I will give this land"* (12:7). Abraham journey about 40 kms further south to Bethel and built another altar. Great! Abraham is in Canaan, the Promised Land. He can put on the brakes and settle down. But then note, Abraham set out and continued toward the Negev – the desert region further south (12:9) ... We'll come to that next week.

For the moment let's go back to Abraham's first stop, Shechem (12:7).

Last week we focussed on Genesis 12:1-4. The Lord said to Abram, *"Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you."* Lo and behold, Abraham, aged 75, packed up his tents, herded together his sheep and goats, and went. It is an amazing story of faith, trust, and courage as Abraham dares to leave behind everything he knows and loves to embark on an adventure that will lead him who-knows-where. Notice the Lord is annoyingly vague: *"Go ... to the land I will show you."* No map. No details. Just follow the Lord's leading step-by-step.

How are we at following the Lord with that kind of faith? I have to be honest. I like details. I like to know all the "i"'s are dotted and the "t"'s are crossed. But sometimes God does simply ask us to step out in faith – to trust – to have courage – and to embark on an adventure that will lead who-knows-where.

After walking 800 kms, Abraham, Sarah, and his entourage arrive in Shechem, in the heart of Canaan (modern day Israel). There he builds an altar.

Some altars in the Old Testament were built for animal sacrifices. Others – like this one – were built as memorials to certain key events – like Abraham arriving in the Promised Land. If you are using the reading guides, you'll notice that folks like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are always building altars when anything significant happens. They serve as reminders of important events – like arriving safely in the land you were promised.

Altars also serve as meeting places between God and people. Here people worship God and here, often, God speaks to people. These are holy places, where heaven and earth touch in special ways. So at Shechem, when God does say, *"To your offspring I will give this land,"* Abraham builds his first altar.

What does the altar at Shechem represent? It represents the beginning of the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham: *"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you"* (12:2-3). The beginning of God's plan of salvation for all nations, begins right here – in Shechem.

Abraham's offspring become the Israelites. Their role, like Abraham's, is to be a blessing to the nations. They were NOT chosen by God to be some distinct, separate, elite people – as they came to believe themselves to be – but to be God's good news to the nations. They, like Abraham, were blessed to be a blessing. With the exception of a few shining lights (like Joseph, Jonah, Daniel, and a few others, they never really caught the vision).

The story of the Old Testament is a sombre story of hope and heartbreak, inspiration and idolatry, virtue and vice as the people of Israel fail to achieve their God-given calling to be the holy people of God, and to be His good news to the nations. But here's a beginning anyway.

We come back to Shechem in Genesis.

Abraham's grandson, Jacob, journeys back to the ancestral homeland up north to find a wife. Years later, Jacob returns to Canaan and meets his estranged brother, Esau – the brother who wished to kill Jacob. Esau welcomes Jacob home with open arms. Jacob purchases land at Shechem, digs a well ("Jacob's well") and builds an altar, calling it El Elohe Israel, meaning "Mighty is the God of Israel" (33:18-20). Jacob, God's chosen one, is reconciled with his family. Shechem marks a new beginning for relationships. It's looking good.

Unfortunately, shortly thereafter, Jacob's sons go on a genocidal, murder-and-pillage of the Canaanite settlement at Shechem. The town is wiped out. In horror at this sons' bloodlust and thievery, Jacob calls them to repentance: *"Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you (implying they have some!), and purify yourselves and change your clothes"* (35:2-3). So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods they had and the rings in their ears, and Jacob buried them under the oak at Shechem (35:4). Shechem represents confession, repentance, and a new beginning – again.

Unfortunately, Genesis reads a bit like a broken record. A new beginning. Hope. Disaster. A new beginning. Hope. Disaster ...

We're not done with Shechem, yet.

Jacob's sons sell their brother, Joseph to slave traders, who take him to Egypt (these boys are not nice!). In Egypt, after many ups and downs, Joseph ends up as Pharaoh's right-

hand-man, saving Egypt (blessed to be a blessing to all nations), AND his own family from starvation during seven years of famine. As Joseph is dying, he makes his brothers promise that they will take his remains and bury them in Canaan (Genesis 50:24-25). Moses and the Israelites make good on this promise, ultimately burying Joseph at Shechem (Joshua 24:32). Shechem is a holy place where Joseph, the one who saved Israel and Egypt, is still venerated to this day ("Joseph's tomb" is a pilgrim site).

So ... Shechem is a site of new beginnings, restored relationships, repentance, and salvation.

Fast forward

Fast forward centuries, to the 1st Century AD. Shechem is now called Sychar. It's not actually in Israel anymore, but in a region known as Samaria. The Samaritans were an ethnically mixed, religiously blended people who had interwoven beliefs from the surrounding non-Jewish religions with Judaism. They held on to the first five books of the Old Testament but rejected everything else. Jews had nothing to do with Samaritans (4:9). They would go around Samaria rather than pass through it.

John 4, however, tells us that Jesus is travelling from Judea to Galilee, and, John says, "*He HAD to go through Samaria*" (4:4). No, He didn't. The normal road went around Samaria. But notice where Jesus is going: "*He came to a town in Samaria called Sychar – Shechem – near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well*" (4:5-6).

It was noon when Jesus reaches Jacob's Well, at Sychar/Shechem. When a Samaritan woman comes to draw water, He asks her for a drink. And one of the most significant conversation's in Jesus' ministry takes place.

The woman questions Jesus' request, given He is a Jew and she is a Samaritan. Jesus ignores that question and offers the woman "living water:" "*Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life*" (4:13-14). In the prophets, water is a metaphor for God and His Spirit, but, as a Samaritan, who only holds to the first five books of the Old Testament, she misses the reference.

She gives a flippant response, but Jesus digs deeper, asking about her husband. She's had four husbands and is now living with a man to whom she is not married. She again changes the subject – Jews and Samaritans worship in different places. Jesus replies, "*A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth ... God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth*" (4:23-24).

All she wanted to do was get some water, go home, and mind her own business. This is a lot more than she had bargained for when she left home. She does know both the Samaritans and the Jews are waiting for the dawn of a new era, in which the Messiah will come and explain everything. Trying to shut down the conversation, she says: "*I know that Messiah (called Christ) is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us*" (4:25).

Then Jesus declared, *"I, the one speaking to you—I am he"* (4:26).

This is the first time Jesus explicitly claims to be the Messiah, the long-promised, much-anticipated Saviour, Priest, and King. He doesn't make this claim in Jerusalem. He makes it in Samaria – specifically in Shechem. Why?

Because this IS Shechem.

- This is a place of new beginnings with God. This is where Abraham first stopped and built an altar. Here God first said, *"To your offspring I will give this land."*
- This is a place of restored relationships. This is where, when Jacob came home, was reunited with Esau, and dug this well.
- This is a place of repentance and reconsecration. When Jacob's sons viciously pillaged Shechem, this where they were called to repentance and put away their idols.
- This is the place of salvation. When Joseph's bones are brought back from Egypt, this is where they are laid. Joseph saved Egypt. He saved his people.

At Shechem we see ourselves as part of a bigger story. A bigger narrative. God – since the days of Adam and Eve and their original sin – has been working to save, renew, and restore all of His creation. It began anew here. God has only one plan to save the world – through Abraham and his descendants. It continued through Jacob and Joseph, here.

As Jesus comes here, He is stating in no uncertain terms that HE is the one ALL people – Jews and non-Jews (like the Samaritans) – have been waiting for. *"I am the water of life, I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the good shepherd, I am the way, the truth, and the life."* So, Shechem, is a place, metaphorically speaking that we all have to come to at some point in our lives.

- Do we need a new beginning with God? This Samaritan woman at the well sure did; Jesus offered it to her. His grace is enough.
- Are our relationships a mess? Do we need a new beginning with other people? This Samaritan woman sure did; Jesus brought healing into her life. His grace is enough.
- Are there things in our life we need to repent of? Be forgiven for? This lady sure did; Jesus offers her mercy, grace, and forgiveness. His grace is enough.
- Do we need a bigger purpose, a bigger story in which to belong? A story of God's plan to save, renew, and restore His creation? Does you need to know your life has significance? Do you need to know that you're loved? Do you need to know you have purpose? This woman did. His grace is enough.

What about us? All of this and so much more come kaleidescooping together in this one place in this one moment. Jesus says, *"Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink"* (John 7:37). This is the time to come to Jesus.

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