

“Beyond Forgiveness . . . “  
 Sermon for 27 October 2019  
 Texts: Genesis 21:22-34

Some degree of oriental, or near eastern indirectness must be accounted for in this account of Abraham’s forming of a covenant with the Gentile king of the Philistines, Abimelech. Perhaps the king senses some coolness of relationship between them and, so without addressing the matter directly, he comes to visit Abraham. He comes with Phicol the commander of his army. He says, **God is with you in all you do.** (v.22) I can’t speak for you, but that seems very, very indirect to me. There is to suggest that the dialogue rushed forward at this point. This statement of fact just hangs out. Then, after time for that to settle in, he continues, **Now therefore, swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me, with my descendants or my posterity.** (v.23) You will act kindly towards me and mine **as long as you sojourn here.** We know that Abimelech had reason to want some assurance in this department because Abraham had lied self-protectively before (i.e. dealt falsely). Further Abraham had suspected that the Philistines, having **no fear of God** so far as he knew, might rise up, slay him and appropriate his wife, the beautiful octogenarian that she was, for themselves in marriage. This would qualify as a kind of Helen of Troy incident, although Helen I am given to understand had the bloom of youth on her side as well as a promise of potential offspring. This was before the birth of Isaac chronologically speaking. But more pointedly, the danger of having a large nomadic family dwelling in your kingdom was the danger of foreign alliances which neighboring tribes often engaged in so as to raid, plunder and acquire other peoples wealth and property.

Again, utmost discretion is in play here. Abraham had indeed lost property to some of Abimelech’s servants. They had violently seized, or appropriated from Abraham a viable water supply, a well that Abraham had dug. In that region with flocks and herds to water and manage, the source of good water was vital to thriving—even to surviving. The loss of a well was a very big deal. That would have been the elephant in the living room so to speak. But we know that it was only there from Abraham’s side because, as soon as the king hears about the matter, he says, **I do not know who has done this thing, this hostile take-over; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today.** (v. 26) Once again, indirection prevails. We note that Abraham agrees to **swear to an agreement for concord** before the conflict is mentioned. Only after signaling friendship does Abraham let Abimelech in on the controversy! This is so respectful. By not bringing it up first, directly, or confrontationally, Abraham is giving Abimelech the benefit of the doubt. *Of course, you knew nothing about this, your majesty. If you had, I am sure you would have already taken care of it.* There may even be some chiding of Abraham going on, “We’re friends, You should have brought this to my attention long ago. It has troubled you unnecessarily.” A glance at Phicol would suggest that the king wanted this addressed as soon as possible and rectified. Ownership would be restored to its rightful owner and his servants could go dig themselves another well some ways off. I believe that there were seven sacred wells in this vicinity besides the one in dispute.

Again, there is much unspoken going on here. We aren’t told Abimelech ordered anything to be done. One could simply assume that it would be done. It was the right thing to do. Therefore Abraham proceeds immediately to the preparation for a covenant

sacrifice. **Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech.** (v.28) There was no price, no cost and no receipt; it was all undertaken on the basis of mutual trust and understanding. Both men knew what they were doing and what they were getting into. This implies a large amount of common religious ground—shared conventions perhaps. ritual practices and forms of worship. But the gift of the seven ewe lambs, apart from the sacrificial beasts, puzzled Abimelech: **What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs that you have set apart?** Oh, that, responds Abraham, **These seven lambs you will take from my hand, that this** (gift gesture) **may be a witness for me that I dug this well.** They were a seal on the return of the well deal which had taken place unexpressed outwardly. Abraham was saying, I am so certain that you have decided this matter that I am taking it to be a done deal.

The covenant, on the other hand, had to do with the guarantee of friendship Abimelech sought with this blessed man of God, the prophet who had prayed for and secured his healing. He wanted to be friends with God's friends in hopes that God would be friends with him. Here's what Abraham knew going into this covenant treaty—he knew that it would be at least four hundred years before Israel would occupy the Promised Land. He could enter into an oath affecting himself, his son and his grandsons with no concern that the covenant would be prematurely broken. It was a long term deal, but not in perpetuity. I would call this rational, not shrewd, or calculating; Abraham promised something he was reasonable sure he could deliver on. That's wisdom.

We have read of so much strife, so much false dealing in Scripture in our reading through the bible that it is truly a relief to have this oasis of trust and friendship between nations. Peace is possible. This is a picture of growing spiritual maturity, growing trust in God on Abraham's part. The next episode will make severe demands on that faith so we shall see how Abraham bears up.

**Amen.**