

“Isaac Dwelling in Beersheba: Its Inner Meaning for Us Today”

Rev. Kit B. Billings

August 29, 2021

Scripture Readings

Genesis 26:23-33

John 12:24-25

Hymns/Songs

“This Little Light of Mine”

“Holy Spirit, Truth Divine” 13

“Holy, Holy, Holy” 451

Genesis 26:23-33

²⁶ When Abimelech went to him [to Isaac] from Gerar with Ahuzzath his adviser and Phicol the commander of his army, ²⁷ Isaac said to them, “Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?” ²⁸ They said, “We see plainly that the LORD has been with you. So we said, let there be a sworn pact between us, between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you, ²⁹ that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the LORD.” ³⁰ So he made them a feast, and they ate and drank. ³¹ In the morning they rose early and exchanged oaths. And Isaac sent them on their way, and they departed from him in peace. ³² That same day Isaac's servants came and told him about the well that they had dug and said to him, “We have found water.” ³³ He called it Shibah; therefore the name of the city is Beersheba to this day.

John 4:1-15

Jesus and the Woman from Samaria

4 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John ² (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), ³ he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. ⁴ And he had to pass through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.

⁷ A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” ⁸ (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” ¹¹ The woman said to him, “Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us

the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.” ¹³ Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” ¹⁵ The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.”

Insight for Worship

Heavenly Secrets 3424 by Emanuel Swedenborg

3424. “And the servants of Isaac digged in the valley, and found there a well of living waters.” That this signifies the Word as to the literal sense in which is the internal sense is evident from the signification of “digging in the valley” as being to make one’s search lower down in respect to where truths are. ...the Word of the Lord is such that it gives life to him that thirsteth, that is, to him that desireth life, and that it is a “fountain whose waters are living.” That the Word is living and therefore gives life is because in its supreme sense the Lord is treated of; and this being the case, there is in the Word life itself, which flows into the minds of those who read the Word with reverence. And, just as the Lord’s Word is called a “fountain,” so is it also called a “well.”

SERMON: “Isaac Dwelling In Beersheeba: It’s Inner Meaning for Us Today”

The Old Testament narrative contains a plethora of fascinating, if not magical, plots and characters. For example, the story of the Patriarchs and their wives and how God works with and blesses them awakens the child-like imagination inside us all. Abram is called by God to leave his home country and pack up and simply *go* to an unknown land where he will be blessed and become the father of a great nation—because he is a humble man willing to obey God’s voice. He is visited by angels; he wondrously prospers and is carried so well by God’s grace. Miracles of birth happen! Beautiful maidens capture the eye of God’s chosen leaders, and these young women, like Rebekah (the wife of Issac), are good people, living virtuous lives who enable God’s people to multiply and prosper. Twins are born to Isaac and Rebekah, one all hairy and red whose hand has a hold of his brother’s foot on their way out of the birth canal! And Jacob, that rascal who stole the birthright of his brother Esau, once saw angels ascending and descending upon a ladder connecting Heaven and Earth!

The Lord’s New Christian Church on earth, of which this congregation is committed to be a part, is blessed with a rich storehouse of mental tools, called “doctrines” or “teachings” that help our minds to look more carefully at the Bible story—that is, to see and understand it well both literally and symbolically.

Did you know that Jesus Christ our Lord, clearly loved doctrine!? What makes me say that? Because He deeply knew and understood the literal sense of the Word, such as the five Books of Moses, the Ten Commandments, and the Psalms and Prophets, and thereby was able to draw out a knowledge of spiritual truths that guided Him as He lived His life according to those truths, which were from love. He also knew and understood the inner, deeper meanings within the literal sense of the Word, such as that if we allow anger and hatred to rule our hearts then we commit spiritual murder, as Jesus said: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." We must always remember what the apostle Paul understood, that there is a literal and spiritual meaning to the Word of God, for he said: "For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." (2 Cor. 3:6) The nature of God's Word having both a literal and an inner-spiritual meaning was reflected by how often Christ spoke in parables, which contain a deeper meaning: "All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, He said nothing to them without a parable." (Mtt. 13:34)

What were other doctrines or teachings of Jesus Christ—given by His verbal words or by His great actions? One is, that we often need to look for and understand our own selfish inclinations and repent of them, and make crucial changes in our attitudes and behavior to live according to the Lord's Commandments and pray for Divine help in doing so: thus to be and do better than the "Blind Pharisees!" As Christ once said, "First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean....on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." (Mtt. 23:26,28) And, our Lord taught that heavenly happiness (in this life and in our eternal life) can be found by living according to His Commandments.

God's Word is like a well, which we read about in *Genesis* this morning. As we read and study and think deeply about the stories and ideas in the Word, which we know stems from the Lord's own mind Itself, we're able to draw out principles and doctrines of life that quench our thirst for understanding how to live a good life. When we look down into a well, we aren't able to see its bottom, where it stops. And the more we draw out water from it, it never ceases to quench our vital thirst! Then it's up to us to choose to draw the waters of truth from God's Word often, and to pray to the Lord for His Divine help and live by its wisdom.

Our theology informs us that the simple use of doctrine is to give a person's higher or spiritual intelligence something realistic, meaningful and beautiful to work with, but also that doctrine exists solely for the purpose of ***leading a person into more of what is good and true in life.***

Okay, so that's some initial thoughts about doctrine. **It provides structure and protection for your mind.** This morning we're blessed to deal with the intriguing dealings that go on between the second great Patriarch of Israel, ***Isaac***, and his relationship with certain non-Hebrew people the Philistines, and his choice to make a new life for himself (as God called him to), by moving to a special place, which was the southernmost border town of ancient Israel, ***Beersheba***. As we can learn from our ***Genesis*** text, Beersheba means "well of oaths," since it was there that very important agreements or covenants were made between Abraham, Isaac and the King of Gerar (a Philistine king), named Abimelech.

On the very important level of biblical symbolism, today's Bible lesson is dealing with something profoundly important for us all—the deeply important growth of our deeper, love-fed spiritual ***REASONING*** that is open to spiritual light, and therefore seeing life in a more meaningful way. It's the sort of REASONING that is very open to a higher light—it helps us see easily into the heart of things, and sees what is ***right*** and especially what is ***good in life.***

One day, a wise old Sage was watching a morning sunrise take place while a local citizen was on his way to work. The hurried businessman was taken aback by how intent this gentle old man watched something he'd seen happen every morning on his way to work. The young worker asked, "Old man, what are you staring at so intently? All I see is the usual arrival of new light as that huge ball of hydrogen gas near our planet shows itself more because our planet spins on its axis. Do you see something else?" And the Sage replied, "Why yes. I see what you see, but much, much more." "Tell me what you see old man," the young man asked.

"I see God's promise of His glorious, resplendent love and wisdom returning into my life and my mind after I've had a dark night of the soul. I feel the warmth of God's love that has no prejudice about anyone. I feel the beauty of heaven pouring into all life and material here on this lovely planet. And I feel the POWER of God's might and Light, which cannot be controlled or harnessed by the cleverest of human beings." The young man stared at the man, and then at the rising dawn. And for the first time ever, this young man began to see more deeply than he'd ever seen his life before.

This was an example of a person like you and me learning to see the dawn of a new day as a vitally important tool of doctrine or truth of spiritual teachings that began to affect and impact his life in a positive way.

As we start to use the awesome doctrines of our New Church faith and unlock the great spiritual truths contained in this story of Isaac and Abimelech, great wisdom shines from these pages when we participate in this story's literal and inner meaning. Our theology sees Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as more than literal figures in the ancient history of Israel. Symbolically, these three men represent the earliest love, spiritual reasoning and usefulness that happened in each of us growing up, as young children.

We may note that Isaac was not the first child born to Abram and his wife, Sarai. Ishmael came first, who corresponds to the first kind of reasoning power that life presents us, a more natural kind. **"Ishmael reasoning"** thinks from the outward appearances of things. It thinks from a shallower place, without interest in God's truths or principles yet—yet, it can remember Bible facts and trivia quite well, as when young kids are learning Bible stories and remember them literally very well, without seeing any basic application of them yet. Our Ishmael reasoning is represented by the "wild-ass" in the Bible, the kind that Jesus rode into Jerusalem. This reasoning is wild and undisciplined when in regard to higher principles and truth in life—on some days it moves from love well, while on others, it prefers anything but love.

Ever notice there's a part of your mind that REBELS AGAINST HIGHER THINKING? It rejects spiritual reasoning because it enjoys thinking from self-alone. We adults can easily revert back to that young child's way of thinking, when our thinking and choices are centered on self-alone or self-gratification alone. Isaac corresponds to or symbolizes a dramatically better and higher way of rationality, a **TRUE RATIONALITY, based on the desire to learn and obey the truths of the Word, because they come from an infinitely wise and loving God.**

BUT, IF WE'RE TO ATTAIN OUR HIGHER POTENTIAL, that wild-stubborn animal in the natural mind must learn its place, so to speak, in order for something higher and greater to be born! If we're open to such deep and sometimes painful transformation, then a whole new form of thinking and seeing things rises from the ashes of living more as a wild-ass man or woman. This changing of the mental guard within us all is crucial, since our Ishmael reasoning loves to consider "me, myself, and I" first and foremost and also worldly gain, honor and reputation. It handles the basic realities, facts, structures and forces of the natural world very well, and it's actually very needed to function capably in the workplace and at home. It's the kind of reasoning power we have that's fed by our five physical senses—what I can see, feel, hear, touch and taste. **But, when it comes to understanding who and what God and spiritual truth REALLY IS, "Ishmael reasoning" cannot hold a candle to "Isaac reasoning!"** No way!! Not in a million and a half years...never.

Isaac reasoning is born in us when we begin to realize that things are not always just what they seem to be. Our senses sometimes deceive us. Our plans do not turn out as we expected. **There are spiritual laws that must be learned and obeyed.** When we see this, Isaac is born.

In short, 'Isaac' represents spiritual love empowering how we are thinking and wanting to talk and behave, in spiritually loving ways. Isaac also signifies the Lord's interior self, and in a parallel sense, he symbolizes our deeper and more interior self too.

Ishmael reasoning looks at physical death, for example, as a terrible tragedy and end of life, while his half-brother, Isaac, sees death as two things at the same time: 1) the sad, grief-stricken loss of a deeply loved family member; and 2) the start of something new, a graduation into our great purpose for being born in the first place—entrance into God's Kingdom of Heaven and the joy and meaning of living life at our highest potential!

And as the Bible narrative reminds us, Isaac received the Lord's blessing, helping us to understand that we're born to enjoy the use of a more peace-loving, stronger and wiser way of thinking. It's one that looks in the simple direction of love for the Lord and true spiritual concern and compassion for others. And, it's a kind of thinking that loves sound, genuine doctrine or religious teachings symbolized by Isaac making his home in the city of Beersheba.

And what's even more useful to see is the fascinating covenant made between Isaac and King Abimelech, who represents thinking about doctrine from a more intellectual place inside of us, but it's an affection for learning biblical and religious ideas only, and then not caring at all to want to struggle in real life to live by them. We all have this "Philistine persona" in us, which is echoed in this question: **We all enjoy learning new things, but do we welcome good advice, and then following it?**

Beersheba was a place where new oaths were made and life-giving wells were dug and enjoyed. **[Our spiritual potential is being expressed here, AND, our desire to want to dig personally inside of God's Word, allowing the Lord to give us the living water of truth that saves us when we follow it.](#)**

All human beings have this innate ability of which I speak today, because of being made in God's image and likeness, which I find echoed so beautifully in the words given through the prophet Micah:

**["He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you](#)**

but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?" (6:8)

In conclusion, the "Isaac" depth of being and thinking within me, now reaches out to the "Isaac" depth of love and perception in you, and says, "Aren't we blessed to be given life and the power to live as the Lord teaches us to live? Let's go draw more fresh water and truth from God's Word today, and live it every day!" Amen.