

Many of you have asked me what I did during my sabbatical. I look forward to sharing with you in my sermons some of what I learned and experienced during this time away. Today I want to focus on two stories. The first is God’s story revealed in this Hebrew text (the familiar story of Rebekah and Isaac). The second is God’s story revealed through the history of Hawaii where we spent our first week of my sabbatical. Both stories make this point: life happens; it takes many twists and turns; some better, some worse. But the long arc of creation history belongs to God; history IS God’s.

Let me say up-front that I do not believe God makes bad things happen to people (as though God is pulling the strings of human puppets). But I do believe, that in the midst of life, God is ever-present, ever-moving, and ever-creating possibilities for the best possible good in spite of the way the world is. And I do believe, beyond all that eyes can see and ears can hear and hearts can understand, that history is God’s domain. *Redeeming, creating, and saving history is God’s.*

The biblical patriarchs tell us stories of ordinary and often flawed human beings in whom God’s presence and influence is experienced. Rebekah and Isaac descend from the family of blessing and promise, but they have a problem; they can’t get pregnant. Infertility is a big problem in Genesis; Isaac’s parents, Abraham and Sarah, were infertile for many years. Think about it... In those earliest days of humans on earth, infertility posed the daunting danger of *extinction* because population numbers were so low. Children were absolutely necessary both to populate the earth and to meet the needs of food production for the family.

Rebekah and Isaac’s story tells us that because they cannot conceive, they turn to the Holy One and open themselves to divine grace and to divine purposes. Perhaps if they had conceived “*on their own*” and been able to sustain their livelihood “*on their own*” they would have not needed God. This story says that whether we are conscious of it or not, we take our breath from the Divine creator. Our lives belong to the Divine. We will hear more of Isaac and Rebekah’s story next week.

Now I’d like to share with you some history of Hawaii, and the church’s role in that history. The New England Congregational Churches (who later joined with other denominations to become the UCC) came to Hawaii in 1820 at the request of a native Hawaiian who begged that Christianity be brought to his homeland. But before the missionaries arrived, Hawaii had been the destination of traders, whalers, and adventurers bringing alcohol, guns, and diseases for which the Hawaiians had no immunities. It is estimated that western diseases reduced the Hawaiian population by possibly 80%, from about 300,000 to 60,000 over a 75 year span.

Though the missionaries came with good intentions and many gave their lives to help the Hawaiian people, their message was one of superiority; they did not honor the native culture. Some historians note that Native Hawaiians saw how western Christians were immune from the diseases that decimated their own people and thus, they converted to Christianity *en masse*, perhaps in hopes of acquiring the same immunity.

It was not the missionaries but their descendants, who became known as the “Missionary Boys,” who along with the United States military overthrew the monarchy, resulting ultimately in the annexation of Hawaii. These are broad strokes of just a part of the Hawaiian history. And yet, we believe that history is God’s, and God’s Spirit is never thwarted. God works on human hearts and God works on us, the church. In recent decades we as church came to understand our own complicity in the oppression of native Hawaiians. The church came to repentance. We recognized that our own ancestors participated in destroying the culture and commerce that had sus-

tained native Hawaiians for many generations before us. When we vacation in Hawaii (like Tom and I did), we are enjoying a paradise created in part by a foreign country intervening and oppressing less powerful people. In the year 1993 (the year I was ordained to ministry), the president of the United Church of Christ, Paul Sherry, directed by the General Synod of the church offered an apology to the Hawaii people. And in addition, the United Church gave redress of \$4.5 million in grants and property to native Hawaiian churches and native cultural organizations. (Showed video clip here.)

I believe these actions were grace-filled moments. We are not to grovel in despair because of actions taken long before we were born. Yet, we are empowered to be God's blessing in the present day. We live in hope because we believe that the Holy One is freely moving and creating and responding to all of creation in love. We, too, can be God's channels of blessing and to offer apology is to be able to heal and reconcile. It is not a shameful act; it is a glorious gift of God's redeeming work in history.

Permit me to take a few moments to share an experience I had one morning when Britany and I signed up to take a yoga class while in Maui. The class was held in the hotel atrium where glass covered the walls and ceilings. It was a beautiful panoramic view. Our teacher began class drawing us into a meditative mood, and we began simple moves. Then we heard sounds; pounding sounds coming from above. As we positioned ourselves in awkward poses, we saw above us on the atrium glass a man cleaning the windows. He sprayed cleaner, then plopped down the squeegee to wipe it away, over and over and over.

We looked at him from upside down; and he could view our contorted and undignified positions. It was really hard not to get annoyed, not only because of the distracting noise but because we wondered if the wood frames holding the glass would be sound footing for the man. We were trying to become at peace, body and soul. We'd paid good money for a nice hotel and this class to renew us. It was only an hour class; couldn't the Sheraton do window cleaning on a different schedule? But he didn't stop; he just kept on: spray, plop, wipe.

Then our gifted teacher wove into her instruction these words: imagine our friend above us, clearing the glass of all that would impede our vision from viewing the beautiful blue sky. Let our hearts thank him for allowing us to see such beauty. I must admit my attitude changed. In that moment, it occurred to me that interpretation is very important. Interpretation and framing of what we experience can shape our response to that experience.

If we interpret the long arc of history as belonging to God, it frees us from the often frantic desperation of daily life that can bring us down. We are free to do what we can do, to offer ourselves in service to creation, knowing the future is embraced within a loving God whose love knows no end.

When our Bible story ends for today, Rebekah's and Isaac's sons have been born, but there is much more to come. They lived their parts in a much larger, longer, revelation of a God who cares to be present in the lives of ordinary people, even people like us. So we take heart and we rejoice and we trust, because we live believing that history is in God's hands.