

Psalm 34:1-10, 22 ~ Matthew 5:1-12

*Create Goodness in the World*

All Saints' Sunday ~ Sacrament of Holy Communion ~ Nov. 5, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Communion Meditation

### *Introduction*

You may have heard it said that financial success is a sign of God's blessing. The more money and stuff you have, is a sign that you are living right in God's eyes. There is even a name for that way of thinking about faith. It's called the "Prosperity Gospel." But, you know, I've never found that "Prosperity Gospel" in this Bible. Matthew, Mark, Luke & John, the four gospels in our Bible say otherwise.

In fact, Jesus says quite the opposite, beginning with his Beatitudes in Matthew 5. What you are about to hear me read, what we call the Beatitudes, are his lead, his hook at the beginning of the sermon on the mount. They stand at the heart at the core of our Christian faith. Core principles that we share with the other two Abrahamic religions: Judaism and Islam. Here's the amazing thing about these beatitudes, which could be considered our faith's constitution. If you are yearning to find "common ground" between the land mines of our combative, divisive political landscape, look no further. The "common ground," the holy grail of politics is right here. If we have ears to hear and hearts to heed Jesus' word.

In these 12 verses you will hear what God values. And spoiler alert: It's not about gaining material wealth. Or fame. As stewards of God's manifold grace, Jesus calls us to see our money, our time, our abilities in a different light. A cosmic light, where Love and Goodness reign supreme. It begins with an attitude adjustment. Everyday. How is Jesus calling us to live be-attitudinally, today? Our answer can be found in Matthew 5:1-12, the traditional gospel reading for All Saints' Day.

### **Introduction to Drama:**

Are you ready to time travel? On this cosmic All Saints' Day, we have a story, a legend, a midrash that will crisscross centuries in the blink of an eye. Sci-Fi fans, this one's for you! Yes. Hold onto your hats folks, you are about to see Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac materialize before your very eyes. In the world of midrash, or Jewish commentary; God and humans are in constant debate, and anything can happen. Like Abraham and Sarah walking into a Rabbi's study here in 2023, wanting to get their son, Isaac, confirmed, as we Presbyterians call it. In the Jewish tradition, this rite of passage for a boy when he reaches the age of 13, is called a Bar Mitzvah.

Our sermon today will be in form of a story titled; "Isaac's Bar Mitzvah" taken from a story by Rabbi Edward Schechter.

## “Isaac’s Bar Mitzvah”

A four-voice dramatic reading of this story by Rabbi Edward Schechter in *Because God Loves Stories: An Anthology of Jewish Storytelling*, adapted for preaching context. <sup>i</sup>

### **Scene 1: Rabbi’s Study**

**Rabbi:**

I was sitting in my study when a husband and wife walked, so I invited them to sit down.

**Abraham:**

Rabbi, my name is Abraham. This is my wife, Sarah. We have two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, and our mother’s helper, Hagar. We’re thinking of joining your synagogue. We want the boys to get a Jewish education. We’re not very religious, Rabbi... To be honest, I don’t know if Ishmael wants a Bar Mitzvah, but for Isaac it is important to me. You see, Rabbi, we had a bit of a mishap a couple of years ago. We went on a three-day hiking trip together and... er... well, Rabbi, you wouldn’t believe it.

**Rabbi:**

I was curious to hear more, the tension was palpable. But he stopped right there, so I handed Abraham the membership form and dues information. *(Hand Abraham papers.)*

**Abraham:** *(surprised, a bit confounded)*

Building fund? When I was growing up all we had was a tent.

**Sarah:** *(interrupting)*

Abraham, remember to tell the rabbi that Isaac has soccer on Sundays at 12:00—he has to leave Hebrew school early. Oh yes, and by the way, Rabbi, when do we choose a Bar Mitzvah date?

**Rabbi:**

But he is only eight years old! That’s five years from now.

**Sarah:**

Yes, Rabbi, but we hear it is hard to find a place. *(Abraham and Sarah exit from Scene 1 “Rabbi’s Study set” to seats behind the pulpit, the “Synagogue Set.” Rabbi moves to pulpit.)*

### **Scene 2: Synagogue**

**Rabbi:**

It is five years later, just prior to Isaac’s Bar Mitzvah date. He has written a Bar Mitzvah talk, but he refuses to read it to me or his parents. We come to the big day—for him and for me. How many rabbis get to officiate at Abraham’s son’s Bar Mitzvah? Isaac has chosen the portion about his namesake, the binding of Isaac. He gets up to speak to the congregation. *(Rabbi sits down, Isaac stands and speaks from the pulpit.)*

**Isaac:**

The title of my talk is "Isaac's Version." I have a confession to make. It hasn't been easy growing up in my family. My mother was overprotective of me and had little use for my brother, Ishmael. My father was a religious fanatic. He thought he heard God call to him to leave Babylon. It was nice there—we had a big house, and I had lots of friends. After we settled in Israel, things were okay—but then one night, God called to my father again, commanding him to sacrifice me. You think you know the story, but you don't. I overheard their conversation, and I want to share it with you. I want to tell you *my* version.

My father had no questions about the command. For Sodom and Gomorra, he argued with God for hours. But for me—silence. I couldn't believe he would go through with it—how could a father take a knife and plunge it into the heart of his son? But I saw the look in his eyes—he was going to do it—he was a madman. When God finished talking to him I realized the future depended on me—not on God, not on Abraham, but on me—Isaac. So I changed the text without telling God or my father. I added a messenger to intercede... because after God commanded my father, God looked away—as God always does—assuming no other human being could hear God's voice. I changed the text, I added life to the story instead of death. There was my father, the knife in the air, his eyes overflowing with tears, about to fulfill the command.

You thought I was so passive? All those years you wondered: 'How could Isaac have allowed it? Why didn't he do something? He was such a passive victim!' Well, I wasn't. I might have looked that way, bound on the altar, but I had changed the text, the command and now I am telling you the story. You should have seen the look on God's face when it was over. You should have seen the look on my father's face. They didn't know where it came from—well, it came from me. My father and I have never spoken about that day. But if I had not acted, it would have been both the beginning and the end of Jewish life. And if you ask: How could I rebel like this? Why do I tell this story on the day of my Bar Mitzvah? Why don't I follow in the footsteps of my honored father? I respond to you by saying: but I do—for my father *also* did not follow in *his* father's footsteps. (*Isaac sits down.*)

**Rabbi:** (*spoken from seat, still sitting down.*)

Not exactly your typical Bar Mitzvah talk. (I'd like to thank my parents, my grandparents, the rabbi...) Isaac has just told us what we always wondered—what was it like to be Abraham's son? What really happened in the midst of the silences on Mount Moriah?... I don't know what I am going to say, but I have to say something. Just as I am about to stand, I see Sarah get up from her chair, approaching the pulpit. (*Sarah goes to pulpit.*)

**Sarah:**

Isaac, we're proud of you, we really are. And we realize how difficult it has been for you growing up in our family. But perhaps it takes a mother to explain to a son some of what a father is all about. Your father didn't understand those voices, either—he spoke to me about them. He told me how he destroyed his father's religion as a child, how he heard a call as a young man to leave Babylonia, and the same voice that made so many promises for the future suddenly asked him to sacrifice you...you, Isaac, the son whom he loves so much.

Your father was devastated, beyond words, so much so that he left with you early one morning without telling me. But I knew that the day would come. He told me he had to trust the Voice he heard to be the Voice of life. And your father was right, Isaac, but not for the reasons he thought. He was right because God who commanded him was the same God who gave you the mind and heart and courage to fill your role in the story, to make the call of God your own.

How fortunate you were, Isaac. Your ears were attentive, you acted quickly, and no blood was shed. But Isaac, there is something you should know. Your father and I have spanned the centuries as well—God never let us die. He gave us a task to wander the earth through eternity and bear witness to Jewish life, and yes, to Jewish suffering.

We were there when our great-great-grandchildren were enslaved in Egypt, and we stood with them as they walked through the parted waters; we were there when Jerusalem burned the first time and the second time and when our progeny were expelled from Spain... but we also saw, Isaac, that a million Jewish children could not change the text of the Holocaust, could not add a messenger to cry, 'Stay thy hand—do not harm the child...' You see, Isaac, Jewish life is a mystery to us as well.

Isaac, we could not finish what we began, but we know it is a sacred task, a holy task, to unite the peoples of the world under one God. This task was ours, it became yours, and you must hand it to generations to come who won't understand you any more than you understand us. Remember this: 'It is not yours to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it.' (*Sarah sits back down.*)

### Scene 3 Twenty Years Later

**Rabbi:** (*from pulpit*)

It is two decades later. Isaac is now a father to two sons, twins, named Jacob and Esau. He is speaking to them at their Bar Mitzvah—I myself am a very old rabbi. Isaac's brother, Ishamel, has been reunited with the family. Isaac speaks to his extended family, and we are all invited to listen to it.

**Isaac:** (*from pulpit*)

I was there at the moment of creation, and I asked God questions. He commanded me to go back to the future, to create goodness in my own world. I did this as best I could... Now I speak to you—my children, Jacob and Esau; my brother, Ishmael. I charge you, out of your loins will come three major religions of the world. From you, Jacob—the continuity of Israel. From you, Esau—the religion of Christianity. From you, Ishmael—the Arab people and the birth of Islam. Generations of your children to come will look at the same text—the Bible—and claim it as their own. They will see within it, hear within it, the call of God to kill each other in God's name, to persecute each other, to throw each other off the lands of the earth. Christians will kill Muslims, and Muslims will kill Christians, and both will kill Jews. The children of Esau and Ishamel will devour Jacob, and Jacob will never trust Esau or Ishamel again. And the day may come when Jacob himself will become the aggressor.

I charge you, you must change the text, reinterpret the text. You must go back to the future and tell your children and your children's children...God cannot call you good unless you create goodness in your world. The knife is in the air, and your generations to come will be sacrificed unless you, Jacob; you, Esau; and you, Ishamel become the messengers, the messengers of peace. I leave you now, my children and my brother: the Torah is in your hands... the call of God is in your hands. (*sits back down*)

**Rabbi/Pastor Laurie** (*returns to pulpit—conclusion of sermon*)

That's the way it happened some time ago in my study. I am just a rabbi of a small congregation, but with Jewish history you never know who might walk in off the street one day.

Beloved community, I am speaking to you now also as your Pastor, Laurie. Our friends, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are still here with us; the patriarchs and matriarchs of ancient Israel are with us. Especially on this day, this All-Saints' Sunday, we can sense their presence beyond the world, yet still in the world. Elijah beckons at our doors in the footsteps of the Messiah—if from here we will go back to the future and create goodness in our world. Goodness here in our families, our church family, our Marshfield community, and beyond. Goodness that God has called us to create, since the beginning of time, for a time such as this. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Rabbi Edward Schechter, *Because God Loves Stories: An Anthology of Jewish Storytelling*, Steve Zeitlin, editor, (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, A Touchstone Book, pp. 49-55,) adapted for preaching context.