

# What Happened Before the Wedding

Knox Preston, 5 January, 2025 © Scott McAndless

Genesis 23:1-16, Psalm 34:15-22, Luke 7:11-17

**W**e are fast approaching something very special – in two weeks we will finally celebrate the fulfilment of a long and sometimes difficult process of amalgamation. On January 19, we will join together at St. Andrew’s in Hespeler and we will become something new – an amalgamated congregation.

Up until now, however, we have mostly been working towards this separately. And I’d like to take a little bit of time to bring the folks from St. Andrew’s up to date on how the folks from Knox have experienced this.

## A Metaphor

In many of their discussions, there was one particular metaphor that they kept coming back to. They talked about it as a marriage. When they were looking for a partner in an amalgamation, they used words like “dating” and “courting.” They even came to look at their participation in our summer experiment as a kind of “speed dating.”

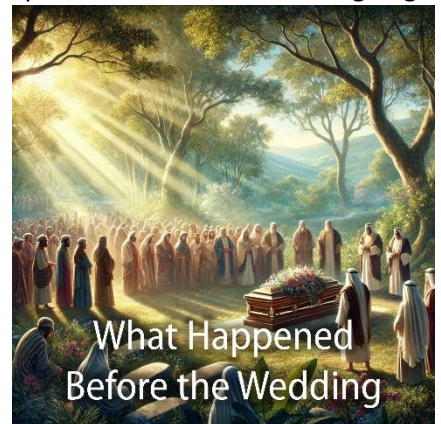
And do you remember the congregational meetings that we held back in the beginning of November? Each congregation had to separately hold a vote to decide if we wanted to begin the process of working out the details of an amalgamation. And Preston met a week before Hespeler. They said, yes, that they wanted to come together with St. Andrew’s. And then they had to wait seven days to hear our answer.

Any guesses how that felt? It felt as if they were down on their knees, holding out that jewellery box with the engagement ring and the one they were proposing to just said, “Hey, can I get back to you in a week?” It made for a bit of an emotional roller-coaster.

## Isaac and Rebekah’s Wedding

With all of that in mind, I would like to embrace that marriage metaphor as we think of what is going to happen in a couple of weeks. In fact, I have concepts of a plan to preach about the wedding of Isaac and Rebekah on that day. But I would notice today that there is something important that comes before that marriage.

Today we read the story about what happened before the joyous wedding of Isaac and Rebekah – the sad death and burial of Sarah, Isaac’s mother. We sometimes don’t realize that there is a connection between the two stories because we tend to read Bible stories without making those connections. But the story of Isaac’s marriage to Rebekah ends by saying that **“Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death.”** (Genesis 24:67)



Sarah's death is only mentioned at the end, but it clearly looms over the story of his marriage. He has suffered a great loss. It seems to have broken him.

## Father-Son Estrangement

But it is not just that Isaac has lost his mother. He also seems to have lost all contact with his other parent. How else can you explain it that Isaac is not there for Sarah's funeral or for all of the arrangements for his own wedding. Abraham isn't even there for the "wedding" when Isaac takes Rebekah into his tent. Isaac just seems to have taken his mother's tent and gone to live in Beer-lahai-roi.

That is odd, isn't it? What could explain such a rejection of a father by a son? Well maybe, just maybe, it has something to do with the time when Abraham took his son, tied him up, put him on an altar and held a knife to his neck. Do you think that maybe that kind of trauma – even if Abraham did it for the right reasons (which is what the Bible insists) – might put a bit of a strain on a father-son relationship?

## Processing a Loss

And that does bring us to something that I think we need to talk about today. I mean to celebrate a wonderful wedding in two weeks, but first, can we talk about the traumatic journey that brings us to this point? Can we talk about a congregation that has to process the end of a 134-year independent history?

That would be hard under the best of circumstances, but some things made it more difficult. Due to the circumstances and some difficult decisions made by the Presbytery, the folks at Preston kind of felt up against the wall. They had a very difficult timeline and a necessity imposed upon them by the Presbytery.

Now, maybe this was a necessary thing. Maybe nothing at all good would have come out of this without that external pressure. I don't mean to judge it. But I'm sure that you can understand how that felt. It might have felt a little bit like being tied up, laid upon an altar of sacrifice and having a knife held to your throat!

So, if we are like Isaac and heading towards a joyous wedding, let's also recognize that we are also like Isaac in that we are carrying some grief and scars and maybe even some unprocessed trauma as we limp towards this wedding. And I can't help but feel as if the passage we read this morning might have some advice for us where we are right now.

## Isaac's Anger

The first thing I would note is this: Isaac really doesn't seem to process his grief for what he has lost very well. He is completely absent as his mother is laid in the tomb. This is clearly not because he didn't love his mother or because he doesn't feel her loss. I believe it has to do with his resentment of his father. His anger at what his dad has done prevents him from properly grieving his loss.

Now, anger is a part of grief. Psychologist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross famously identified anger as one of the essential stages in grief. We need to accept the anger that we feel and process it by asking where it has come from and whether it is legitimate. But getting stuck in anger doesn't help you. And that is what

Isaac seems to have done, and it is probably one good reason why he struggled unnecessarily with his loss for so long.

The endings we are marking this month are real. And the rituals and services that will be held are there to help you to work through that in constructive ways. I hope you don't make the mistake that Isaac made and rob yourself of the opportunity they give you because you are mad at Presbytery or any leadership that has brought us to this place. You won't hurt the people who you feel have hurt you; you will likely only hurt yourself.

## Abraham Comes to Terms with his Nomadism

So, that is what we can learn from Isaac's grief. What can we learn from Abraham's? The death of Sarah seems to force Abraham to come to terms with his nomadic status. He has been living in Canaan as a wanderer for a very long time and has done very well with such a status, so much so that the Hittites see him as **"a mighty prince"** living among them. He has never suffered from having no place to call home until the loss of Sarah hits him like a ton of bricks. All of a sudden, he realizes that he needs a place where he feels like he belongs.

And I am sure that the folks at Knox can relate to some of the things that Abraham is feeling. You are losing an anchor in your lives, a place that helped you to know who you were and where you belonged. It is at moments like this that you realize, like Abraham, that you need to find new places of belonging.

## Will Abraham Pay?

And that is what this whole passage is about. Abraham sets out to find that place much like the folks at Preston set out to find a partner. But the interesting thing about this particular story is the whole question of whether Abraham is going to pay for it.

Once Abraham has discovered the place where his family can belong for all time, he goes to the Hittites to try to obtain it. They react strangely to say the least. Both the Hittites as a whole and the man who actually owns the property want him to have it. They want him to have a place. But they insist that they don't want him to pay for it.

It is hard to know what is going on here. Perhaps it is just a unique look into the ways in which people bartered in that culture. That might be what going on when Abraham keeps on insisting that he must pay until finally Ephron says, **"My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver— what is that between you and me? Bury your dead."** And that is the price that Abraham finally pays.

## Why it's Important to Invest

But more than an insight into how such things were done in that culture, I suspect that this exchange is there to teach us something today. When you are going through a great loss, the people around you, if they are compassionate people, may well react like the Hittites in this story. They may say to you, "No, you have suffered too much; you have lost too much. You shouldn't have to pay anything more. Let us

just take care of everything now. That comes, to be sure, from a place of care. But it is not necessarily the most helpful thing.

Abraham is wise enough to recognize that that isn't going to work – that he can't just be given a place and feel that it truly belongs to him. It must cost him something or something inside him will always tell him that it is not really his. This too is an essential part of the grieving process. You must decide to invest in something new moving forward and, until you do, your natural process of grief may be stunted.

## Why You may Hesitate to Invest

And I think there is an important message in that for us. Coming out of a difficult experience of loss, you may be tempted to coast. You may hesitate to invest yourself too readily into the life of the amalgamated congregation or wherever else your next stop in your personal spiritual journey may lead you.

That is perhaps understandable. You have been burned before. The last time you invested in a religious community maybe it let you down. But do not listen to the Hittites around you, or maybe the Hittites inside your own head, who are saying, “**what is that between you and me?**” The Hittites may be telling you to step back and hesitate to engage yourself but Abraham says, take a risk; step forward with your **400 shekels of silver**. Get involved.

## More than Money

And I hope that you understand in that that I am not merely talking about making a commitment for financial support. Sure, that is important, but it is hardly the only way, and I am not even sure that it is the most important part when it comes to dealing with the grief and loss that you have suffered.

Maybe concentrate at first on making new connections – put yourself forward as a new friend. And you who are welcoming new people into already established groups, welcome people as new friends with the expectation that they have wisdom and valuable contributions to bring, because they do.

And most of all, find a place where you can step in and begin to contribute your time and energy and the gifts and abilities that God has given you. This may be a risk. What if you get something wrong or make a mistake in this new context? No one can guarantee that nothing will go wrong. But Abraham understood that if you do not take a risk, you may never discover where you truly belong.

## Loss and Opportunity

Abraham came to Canaan as an outsider, a wanderer who did not belong. Isn't it interesting that the first foothold he found in this new land came on the heels of the greatest loss he ever suffered, the loss of his wife. This is a reminder that grief and loss cannot be avoided in life, but such times also offer us the greatest opportunities to find ourselves and our place in the life that God gives us.

The wedding is coming. It will be an opportunity for celebration and joy. But take note of where you are now. Perhaps there is a reason why God has brought you here as well.