

Seeds of Change
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Texts: Genesis 25:19-34, Matthew 13:1-9

Do you ever get the sense of layers of history in a place? You see a field, and wonder what it might have been like, hundreds of years ago. Or the texture on an old building and wonder what it was like when it was brand new. Or there's a huge tree and you realize how long it must have been growing in that very spot, season after season. You wonder who might have walked on those same sidewalks two or three hundred years ago, and what their clothes might have been like, and what expressions they were carrying on their faces. The wind blows in a certain way, and you realize that while so much has changed over the millenia, the wind is still the wind, and the sun still shines. Waters flow and seeds grow. I think of all the people who have lived their lives in these places, and the choices they made, and how they have changed history.

Do you ever fast forward and wonder what will happen in this spot or in your neighborhood a hundred or two hundred years from now? What will our world will be like? Whatever your sense of everything that is transpiring right now, you'd have to agree that it feels like we're living through one of those turning points that future students will study in their history lessons. What will our part be in building the future?

From generation to generation, we pass on our traditions and our stories and our culture. This week, thanks to the mention of Paddan-Aram in today's scripture, I've been immersed in the story of the English and the native people who lived along the shores of Apponagansett Bay 350 years ago. Many years ago, when I first heard the story of the Russell Garrison two blocks from my house, it was told as the place where the English sheltered during King Philip's war, when the natives attacked them. At first, it's easy to assume that the conflict was the natives against the English. After all, the English had invaded, bringing an unfathomable amount of disease and disruption.

However, it was never that kind of straightforward, dualist, binary conflict. Many of the coastal natives did not take sides, and some formed allegiances with the English, which made it all the more confusing. More recently, two years ago, our when the Garrison was put on the National Register of Historic Places, our Historic Commission researched and re-wrote the information:

In 1675, angered by the loss of land, liberty, and lives, some Pokanokets under Metacom (aka King Philip) and their allies, entered into war with the English. In late June, the Dartmouth colonists were threatened and a small group of local settlers took refuge in the Russell's house, fearing an attack that never materialized.¹

It was at that spot later that summer where representatives from Plymouth and the Wampanoag negotiated a peace treaty. The native people agreed, but then the Plymouth leadership betrayed them, and took them back to Plymouth and sold them into slavery, sending them to Bermuda, the West Indies, and other places. The Dartmouth residents who had lived in peace among the natives for a number of years were not happy. The Wampanoag People of the First Light had been here for 15,000 years, shattered in less than a hundred. It all happened way before our time, but very directly created the communities in which we now live.

Then, on the same land, 130 years later, the Thatcher family arrived from Cape Cod. William & Thankful Thatcher bought the land that my family and I currently live on. Their adult son Laban

Thatcher, came with his wife Sarah and their seven young children. Among other ventures, Laban was a shipbuilder. In 1816, he hired a ten-year-old apprentice who had been born into slavery in South Carolina. John Mashow learned the ship carpenter's trade, married a Mashpee Wampanoag woman and joined with two others to establish a boat building company, producing more than 30 ships in the early 19th century, and becoming what one historian called one of the most influential African Americans in the US Maritime Industry. Meanwhile, (it was the 1850s), the Civil War was looming, as our country faced yet another cultural upheaval.

Isaac and Rebekah married in a similar time of transition. Two cultures were coming together as the nomadic Mesopotamians wandered into the land of Canaan. Farmers and shepherds, hunters and gatherers. So the biblical story of their twins is not just a story of the rivalry of two individual sons and their two individual parents, but the traditions and values that they each represent. Isaac was born and raised in Canaan by Mesopotamian parents, but he had adopted many of the Canaanite ways, including the patriarchal tradition of passing on property to the oldest son. Rebekah, the immigrant and newcomer, struggled to maintain the social traditions that she and her in-laws had brought with them from Mesopotamia to Canaan, including the practice of passing on the inheritance to the youngest child.

It is no wonder, then, that after twenty years of marriage, this pregnancy was difficult for her. With twins, the difference between oldest and youngest depends on luck and a little bit of jostling for position. For this family, it would have huge implications. Who would be the oldest? Who would be the youngest? Who would inherit? Whose traditions would prevail? Rebekah's response to the trauma within her was to ask God for guidance, and the message she received calmed her: that the elder would serve the younger. It appeared that her customs would prevail.

But as the boys grew up, it didn't look like it was going Jacob's way. Twice during Genesis, we read stories of how that birthright changed hands. Today's reading is about Jacob bartering a much-desired meal of bread and lentil soup with a famished brother. Later it will be Rebekah helping Jacob to trick his elderly and blind father. What do these stories teach us for our day? Whose traditions will be maintained? At what cost? So relevant!

One thing I notice is that we try very hard to set up the story, whatever story, as one against the other. A winner and a loser. Right and wrong. Strong and weak. Oldest and youngest. We seem to make everything into a dualistic, either/or situation. One mistake and we cancel our subscriptions. One misdeed and we rush to boycott. Who would ever have thought that a public health recommendation would become a partisan fight that endangers lives? I'm not saying we shouldn't choose who to read, or which businesses we purchase from. But I do think we need to practice giving people a chance to learn, and grow, and change. Or maybe we make everything dualistic because it's just too hard and too exhausting to figure out all of the nuances.

Our parable doesn't do this. Instead of two options (the sheep and the goats, the wise and the foolish, the first and the last ...), instead we have the seed falling on the rocky soil, on the path, among the thorns, and the good soil. Four possibilities, not two, and only one leads to a bountiful harvest. Oooh ... maybe that's worse. Now we have only a one-in-four chance to get it right.

When we dare to think that some of the reforms our country so desperately needs may actually take root this time, can we possibly think that the seeds of change have finally found the good soil? To be sure, these seeds have been cast many times before. But the stubborn rocks of privilege have taken up too much space. The thorns of fear have choked the new growth. And the crowds following habitual pathways have trampled any hope of something new. But maybe this time ...

We have come to realize that we will not be going "back" to the way we were, but instead are searching

for a new way forward: new traditions, new policies that can indeed bring new life. To do this, we need to give each other the space to learn and grow, and to explore together what we need, the change we need, so that everyone can thrive.

We're not the first ones to desperately need a culture shift. Matthew uses this moment to quote from Isaiah 6. It turns out that these verses are quoted five times in the New Testament: once in each of the four gospels and once in Acts. Matthew chooses this moment to quote this scripture about how the people will look and listen, but never truly perceive or understand, because if they did, they would understand with their heart and turn. They would repent. They would change. Jesus implores us not just to hear, but to understand. Not to follow the well-worn habits and pathways, not to get all excited but then refuse to let our roots go deep, not to give up when it gets tough, not to let the "lure of wealth" distract us from the larger picture.

It sounds familiar, doesn't it? My optimism these days comes from the change I see: and the pace of that change. As Valerie Kaur put it, "What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb? What if our America is not dead but a country that is waiting to be born?"² More people are becoming *more* aware, rather than the other way around. Think about what you have learned these last four months, about our culture, our history, our policies, about where traditions come from. Some things you just can't un-see. More people are lined up to vote, and calling out the systemic voter suppression. But more importantly, more people are learning and understanding our shared history in a new light.

After the Land o' Lakes Princess went missing from my butter box, now Aunt Jemima is being retired, and Uncle Ben, too. Mississippi is redesigning their flag, and Massachusetts is talking about it. Confederate statues are coming down, along with Christopher Columbus. NASA Headquarters is now the Mary W. Jackson NASA Headquarters. We're going to have to figure out what to call the largest bedroom in our house now that master bedroom is recognized as problematic. So are we making progress?

Betsy Hodges, who was the mayor of Minneapolis from 2014 to 2018 had an excellent Op-Ed in the New York Times on Thursday noting the connections between our ideals and what we ask our police to do.

White liberals, despite believing we are saying and doing the right things, have resisted the systemic changes our cities have needed for decades. We have mostly settled for illusions of change ... These efforts make us feel better about racism, but fundamentally change little for the communities of color whose disadvantages often come from the hoarding of advantage by mostly white neighborhoods.³

"The hoarding of advantage" – that phrase needs to stick. She points quite clearly to our part in refusing to address the root causes of the unrest, the disease, and the death. This moment in our history – this uncomfortable, frightening, maddening moment – calls us to change. It seems to me that this time, the seeds might just find the good soil. Enough people have been forced to take a break from their usual busy routines, and readjusted how they spend their days and evenings, and have had time to learn and tweet and march. It is difficult work. We've had to shift our understanding of wearing a mask from protecting ourselves to protecting others.

With God as our guide, may this difficult work be ours. May we recognize and acknowledge the loss of our old culture and let God's seeds of justice finally take root. We're in this together. And we're in this for our future. May it be so! Amen.

¹ Dartmouth Historical Commission for the National Register of Historic Places, August 6, 2018.

² Valarie Kaur, *A Sikh Prayer for America on November 9, 2016*

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/09/opinion/minneapolis-hodges-racism.html>