

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Life on the Land

Genesis 26:12-22

In the 1987 film *Jean de Florette*, a man inherits some land in the French countryside and moves his family there to make a new beginning. Jean wants to raise vegetables and rabbits on the land, which, according to the map, includes a fresh water spring. But his neighbors have other ideas. An old farmer and his nephew have had their eyes on the land as well, and decide to do what they can to discourage this newcomer. So they block the spring with concrete, conceal its location, and wait to see what happens.

For a while, there's steady rain. Jean's vegetables grow and his rabbits multiply. But then comes a drought, and he's forced to bring water from a neighboring well. Day after day, Jean plods back and forth under the burning sun, using his own strength to transport the water to his thirsty land. He tries to borrow a mule from the neighboring farmer who has conspired against him, but gets only vague excuses about how he needs the mule to farm his own land and provide for his own family.

Eventually, it looks like rain is on the way. As Jean and his family run outside to feel it against their faces, the rain falls on neighboring areas but not theirs. Jean shakes his fist at the heavens and asks God why he has been forsaken. He decides to dig a well of his own, but dies from an injury received while using dynamite. His wife and daughter are forced to leave the farm. In the closing scene, the daughter spots the old farmer and his nephew, pulling out the plug from the spring they had blocked, where the uncle proceeds to perform a mock baptism of his nephew in the cold water.

Jean de Florette is a film that captures the relentlessness of human greed and the determination to destroy someone else's happiness. Through the landscape and sky, and the behavior of the story's characters, the director shows how the desire to possess land can lead people to sacrifice their dignity and ruin another person's future.

The preciousness of land, and what it contains, is certainly central to this morning's text from Genesis. Our Scripture passage is part of a series of stories about Isaac, the son of Abraham. Isaac has just emerged, unscathed, from a potentially disastrous situation with Abimelech, king of the Philistines. As a result, the king has warned all citizens to keep their hands off of Isaac and his wife Rebekah. This episode ends up creating a safe space that's soon filled to the brim with God's agricultural blessings. Isaac the farmer is a booming success.

But as often happens, one person's prosperity is another person's problem. More land, more crops, and more profits also mean more envy among the neighbors. The Philistines decide to shut down Isaac's flourishing agribusiness. First, they stop up the wells that Abraham's servants had dug, cutting off Isaac's access to water. Then the king orders Isaac to pack it up and move out of their territory. If Isaac is going to be showered with God's blessings, fine, but let him be blessed somewhere else. His blessedness is threatening the

political establishment in Philistine territory. So Isaac moves on to another region, not too far away.

Soon, however, he runs into the same conflicts over wells and water rights. Reopening some old wells that Abraham had dug was one thing, but when Isaac's servants started digging new wells, some of the local herdsmen claimed ownership of the water. Things got so bad that Isaac started giving names to the spots where disputes broke out, like "Well of Contention" and "Well of Hostility." Finally, he reached a spot where nobody put up a fight over rights to the water/land. So he dug a well and named it Rehoboth, which means "room" or "space."

That's part of what land means to us. Some more room. Some space to spread out. Some acreage to call your own. A place to settle on and live on. Room to flourish. But land is more than just a space to occupy. More than just an earthen platform on which to construct our lives. Land is a gift of God, a gift that we're called to receive and relate to. Land is part of what it means for us to be made by God and to be dependent on God.

One of the benefits of this season of the year is that it gives us an opportunity for a renewed sense of our link with the land. Some of you have made that annual pilgrimage called the trip to the pumpkin farm. For most of you, the fact that you've made the trip probably indicates that you don't spend a lot of your time engaging with the earth and interacting with its fruitfulness. Where else, in the midst of your busy, high tech lives, do you have the chance to walk out into a field and pick your own pumpkin or roam a corn maze? Where else do you ride around sitting on a bale of hay in a wagon being pulled by tractor? Where else do you spend time feeding, petting, or smelling live farm animals? Where else do you get around by taking a leisurely ride on the back of a pony? For so many of us, these kinds of land/farm-based activities and experiences are both loads of fun and a reminder of how disconnected our lives often are from the realities of the ground we live on.

True, some of you do some gardening of your own, tending to your flowers or growing some vegetables. Or at least you rake your leaves, cut your grass, or trim your trees and bushes. We do have some experience with tending and cultivating the earth and what it produces. But overall, our settled lives are dramatically different from the mobile, nomadic existence of the Israelites and their patriarchs. For us, having a dwelling in a particular location, with a specific address, matters. And especially at this time of the year, having a particular place that we can call home, a place we can return to and reunite with loved ones, is important. But for the ancient Hebrews, life was much more of a location to location experience, depending on where they could find a source of water and good pastures. They didn't have to worry about renting storage space to put all their stuff. Their stuff was a manageable, portable amount of supplies and equipment, especially a tent.

By the end of today's text, there's news that the people will have a place where they can spread out and flourish. Rehoboth is its name. Rehoboth is important, in and of itself. But it's also important because it anticipates and points to the day when the people will have their own land, a land of promise, a land "flowing with milk and honey" (Exod. 3:17). God says to his people: "The land you are entering to take over is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you planted your seed and irrigated it by foot as in a vegetable garden. But the land you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of is a land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from heaven. It is a land the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end" (Deut. 11:10-12). Here is a passage that portrays God as the ultimate gardener and farmer, continually looking after the land.

Based on what we hear earlier in the book of Genesis, we're created to participate in God's work of looking after what he has made. We're formed in God's image, and our calling to bear God's image in the world includes exercising dominion, cultivating and caring for God's creation in ways that promote flourishing. And yet, we frequently fail in our calling by the ways that we neglect, abuse, and destroy God's world, including the land on which we live, walk, build, and do business. Our patterns of consumption, our industrial byproducts, and our accumulating waste are just some of the things through which the earth, the soil, feels the impact of our lives.

About a year ago, a British organization reported the results of a survey called the "Earth index." Its purpose was to estimate the "financial value of nature." The monetary values of some aspects of God's creation were as follows: Fresh water valued at \$73.48 trillion; Trees valued at \$16.2 trillion; Coral valued at \$9.9 trillion; Wild sea fish valued at \$224 billion; Plankton valued at \$222 billion; Bees and other pollinators valued at \$170 billion; Vultures valued at \$2.6 billion; One beaver valued at \$120,000. As some people noted, the annual revenues of some of the world's largest companies pale in comparison to these figures, revealing the contribution that the creation itself makes to our well-being and security.

And what about the financial value of land, and the life that comes from it? Oh yes, we try to assign a fixed value to land. But isn't its value immeasurable? Isn't land's worth beyond calculation? As farmer and activist Wendell Berry has put it, "It is worth what food, clothing, shelter, and freedom are worth; it is worth what life is worth."¹

Missionary surgeon Paul Brand once told about a time when, as a little boy, he was playing in the mud of a rice field in South India. The field was part of an area that had been carefully and patiently terraced, so as to preserve the mud that was essential to growing the rice. In the process of trying to catch some frogs, Brand and some friends had stepped on and damaged the earthen dams. Suddenly they spotted an old man called "Tata," or "Grandpa," walking toward them. He scooped up a handful of mud and asked them what it was. They acknowledged that it was mud from Tata's field. He asked them what that was flowing over the edge of the terrace where they had stomped with their feet. They told him it was water. At least that's what it looked like to them. Then Tata showed them another channel with clear water flowing out. "That is what water looks like," said Tata. So he took them back to the first channel and asked, "Is that water?" "No, Tata, that's mud," they answered. The mud was running away to the field below, never to come back again.

Tata went on to remind the boys just one handful of mud would grow enough rice for one meal for one person, and it would do it twice every year for years and years into the future. He said, "That mud flowing over the dam has given my family food since before I was born, and before my grandfather was born. It would have given my grandchildren and their grandchildren food forever. Now it will never feed us again. When you see mud in the channels of water, you know that life is flowing away from the mountains."²

Tata knew that soil is life. So did Abraham, and Isaac, and the other individuals and groups of people with whom they disputed over land and water rights. The opening verse of today's text says, "Isaac planted crops in that land and the same year reaped a hundredfold, because. . ." (v. 12). Because the soil was good? Yes. Because there was water in the ground? Yes. Because there was rain? Yes. But most of all, as the text says, "because the Lord blessed him."

"Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise Him, all creatures here below." A song that we need to sing year-round, but especially at this season of Thanksgiving. A song that reminds us of the ultimate source of life's gifts. Gifts like home, family, friends, shelter,

clothing, work, water, and food. And the land, the soil, from which it comes. The soil from which we come. "Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7). Thanksgiving is an opportunity for us to remember and become more aware of our dependence, our creaturely dependence, on the giver of life, and to reflect gratefully on the channels through which his blessings flow, especially the grace of the land, the gift of soil, and the life God breathes into it.

In our daily lives, we're usually separated from the sources of the food, shelter, and energy we benefit from and enjoy. We generally don't worry about where we'll live or where our next meal will come from. We flip a switch and the lights come on. We lift the faucet handle and the water flows. We adjust the thermostat and the house gets warmer. We turn a key and the car starts. We go to the grocery store and the food is sitting there on the shelf waiting for us. We tap a screen on our mobile device and a voice asks, "What can I help you with?" You might ask how to make stuffing for your Thanksgiving turkey. Then you'll combine it with a table full of other items that sprang, in one way or another, from God's good earth. Vegetables and fruits that other people grew and harvested. Meat from animals that somebody else raised on their farm. Breads made from grain that grew from the soil in another part of the country. And all the people involved in harvesting, processing, packaging, transporting, and selling the things that supply our physical needs and sustain us.

This Thanksgiving, let's be more aware of our interdependence with the people right around us, as well as those far from us, whose lives and work are connected to ours in more ways than we realize or imagine. Let's take time this week to plant some new seeds of gratitude for the earth, and to cultivate a deeper sense of our dependence on the land, and the God who gives it.

¹ Ragan Sutterfield, "Books & Culture's Books of the Week: From Dust to Dust." Christianity Today website. November 1, 2003. Accessed November 17, 2016 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/novemberweb-only/11-3-14.0.html?start=1>>.

² Paul Brand, "A Handful of Mud." Christianity Today website. July 1, 2003. Accessed November 17, 2016 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/julyweb-only/7-7-47.0.html>>.