

Merciful and kind are You, O Lord of hosts, because You have sent the Gospel of Your Son to *many of us who are Gentiles*. Our *forefathers* went to worship idols as they were led, but to us, their children, You have sent the light, though we deserved it not. Cause it to dwell richly with our children and us, and by Your Spirit make it grow in our hearts and bring fruit unto eternal life. Amen. (Reading the Psalms with Luther, Ps. 22, CPH, p.59, *adapted*)

Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Gerar to Abimelech king of the Philistines. And the LORD appeared to him and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws." So Isaac settled in Gerar.

In Christ Jesus, who goes out into all nations to be present with sinners with His gracious presence, dear fellow redeemed:

The land of Canaan was given to Abraham and subsequently to his son, Isaac and grandson, Jacob. But it would not be for over four hundred years that their descendants could actually call it their own. During the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob the Canaanites were in possession of it. The Patriarchs were allowed to dwell in it, but to possess it, besides a family burial site, was not realized until Joshua would lead them back into it forty years after the Exodus.

Of the threefold promise given to the Patriarchs, this part regarding the land perhaps seems to us to be the least. Certainly we recognize the promise of the Christ as a descendant to be primary and then that a great nation would result from their line of descendants would be the next. However, the land that is promised to them is the staging area for the Christ, where God in the flesh would enter our world and accomplish the great acts of our salvation.

But in the Patriarchs' day, the Land of Canaan was a land made up of various tribes of idolatrous people. Yet God called them to dwell in it, which is what God intended and still does to do this day. God called out Abraham from his idolatrous homeland to live in this new one. He was called to serve the only true God, but not called out of this sinful idolatrous world. So let us observe how it is that **In Idolatrous Lands, the Son of Promise Is Even Found to Dwell.**

Abraham was the father of the Jewish people to be distinguished from all other peoples, known as Gentiles. The land he came from and the land he entered were all Gentile lands. However the promise of God to give to him the land of Canaan was as good as accomplished. The children of Abraham were God's own special people, through whom the Christ, the Savior of the world, including Gentiles would come. That is what is meant by that primary piece of God's promise: "in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed".

Observing today the wise men coming from the East to worship the Christ Child, we especially recognize the faith found even among Gentiles. They could only believe with blessing if truly this Savior sent by God was for all people, not just the Jews. Somehow and we do not know for sure, but speculate that these wise men were exposed to the Word of God in their eastern lands probably from the time when Judah was in captivity in Babylon. Perhaps faithful believers like Daniel were instrumental in instructing these Gentiles in the way of salvation in the promised Christ. If so, then there the promised seed of Christ dwelt among them through the Word.

As believers they came to the land of Israel, once the land of Canaan and there found the Christ Child. The appearance of these believing Gentiles from the East troubled the residents of Jerusalem. It was commonly thought and even taught that the Israelites were favored by God over against the Gentiles. Not that these Gentiles could not find salvation in the promised Christ, but they were considered by especially the religious leaders as being so far inferior than the Jews. But with God that was not case. They misrepresented the will of God for all people with no distinctions in favorability.

In our Epistle for today, St. Paul asked this question of the Romans: "is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one –" Our Lord God is God of all His beloved creatures, not just one ethnic grouping.

II

Based on the treatment in Genesis of the three great Patriarchs, Isaac appears to be the less favorable among them. Abraham, his father has about 14 chapters devoted to his life and times. Jacob, Isaac's son of promise, has 21 chapters centering upon him. Isaac only has about 2.5 chapters. And much of what we have, like our text, has accounts very reminiscent of Abraham's.

Instead of trying to draw some negative connotation about this, we might rather observe that believers' lives in ancient times were not all that different from one another, nor from ours in modern

times. The same God who had called them out of this world, choosing them to be His own dealt with them as sinners in the same way as He always does. Believers also related to their Savior God in the same flawed but faithful way, trusting in His gracious heart receiving forgiveness, life and salvation.

The Apostle Peter writes to us NT believers: “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.”

Isaac was forced to move out of the famine stricken land. It would appear that he was intending to travel to Egypt like his father had done under similar circumstances. But our Lord intervenes after he reached the southern area of Canaan. He was in the land of the Philistines. God instructs Isaac to remain there under the protection of Abimelech, the king of Philistia. At this point in time he was well received by the Philistines. God said to Isaac: “Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you” Then our Lord repeated the threefold promise once again for this son of promise.

We may think at times we need to flee the land God has placed us in to find more favorable surroundings. But Jesus, praying to His father on the night before He was crucified, prayed this about us His believers: “I do not ask that You take them out of the world, but that You keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.”

As the Lord Jesus, the Son of Promise, dwelt among the wise men even in their strange idolatrous land before coming to Bethlehem, so He dwells with us through the same powerful and living Word. Isaac, although still a sinner, remained faithful in the idolatrous land to which God had directed him. He was not forsaken. The Lord fulfilled His many promises to this son of Abraham.

It is true that we must be ever vigilant as we dwell in idolatrous lands, but this has always been the case for believers from ancient times. Our Lord comes to us wherever we are in this world and dwells among us in Word and Sacrament.

You might think the wise men came to a land that was not idolatrous, but look at the unbelief they encountered in the capital of Judah. Herod, the chief priests and scribes were not believers who eagerly joined the wise men to Bethlehem, no one from all the troubled residents did. God even had the wise men bypass going back to Herod because of his malevolent plans against the Christ Child. So they returned to their idolatrous lands from whence they came, but very likely as did the shepherds after they saw the Christ Child, “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen”.

So we, my fellow believers in Christ, do the same in the midst of our idolatrous land. The promised Son dwells among us in Word and Sacrament, “lo I am with you always”. Just as Isaac heard, so we hear today: “Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you.” Amen.