

Pastor's Message – 7/5/2020
Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

After two Sundays of horror stories from the first families in the Old Testament, today offers a respite. Our Bible reading from the Book of Genesis today offers up a change of pace from previous passages that have dealt with harsh realities (jealously, exile, and near human sacrifice). This week, we see a marriage being negotiated. What can we possibly learn from the story of how Isaac found a wife? After all, arranged marriage is an institution of the distant past for us in the West.

Our passage today takes only snippets from the longest chapter in the Book of Genesis, so I think we have to back up just a bit and dig beneath the lines a little bit. In the passage today we are actually hearing the thoughts of the servant, who you may know as Eliezer. Abraham doesn't actually die until the next chapter, but as this 24th chapter begins, we witness a virtual deathbed scene and Abraham's last words. He commissions Eliezer to find a wife for his only son, Isaac, not from among the people they are living around, but from his home back in Iraq, back in Haran, from whence he first came. And Eliezer is now on that mission.

The story today is actually a story of transition between Abraham and Isaac. And there are three major events in that transition. The first part is the death of Isaac's mother, Sarah, which leaves the position of clan matriarch open for Rebekah, whom Isaac will love as a mother-substitute (24:67). The second part is the virtual deathbed scene of Abraham. The third part of the transition is the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah. The story is told, not so much in action, but in speeches, using detailed repetition to push the story along and give it suspense and resolution.

The marriage of Isaac and Rebekah closes the beginnings of a covenant between God and Abraham recapping the promise and fulfillment of the covenant, i.e. that God will bless Abraham with land, with children, will make his name to be remembered and bless him that he might be a blessing.

As the chapter begins, we can see the problems that require the story to resolve them. Sarah has died, Abraham is old. God's promise, to provide a multitude of descendants for Abraham, is in jeopardy. He has a son, but that son is not married. No wife—no descendants. No descendants—no nation. So, Abraham sends his servant to rectify that problem. Instead of looking for a wife among the Canaanite woman where they are living, Abraham sends his servant back home to Haran, specifically to the local hot spot where young women regularly ventured: the village watering hole.

The servant's assignment was carried out prayerfully. In fact, this servant

first laid eyes on the winsome Rebekah while in the middle of a conversation with the Lord. We pick up the play-by-play as it happened: O Lord, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. I am standing here by the spring of water, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. Let the girl to whom I shall say, "Please offer your jar that I may drink," and who shall say, "Drink, and I will water your camels" -- let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master.

While the servant was speaking, Rebekah showed up, said all the right words, offered the stranger a place to sleep that night and then ran home to tell the folks her news wearing a newly acquired nose ring and bracelets on her arms.

Would Rebekah accept the mission this servant proposed? Incentives certainly caught her attention. Flocks and herds. Silver and gold. Slaves, camels and donkeys. All this and more would be hers if she accepted this once in-a-lifetime opportunity.

But Rebekah knew very few details. Sure, this deal offered her a husband plus a signing bonus. But she could not have known that her acceptance would make her a crucial figure in God's great plan. She would have twin sons. The name of one of those sons would become Israel. Her grandchildren would become the 12 tribes of Israel. She knew none of this, but said "Yes" anyway.

Rebekah passes the test when she offers to water the camels. Here we have a little bit of Bible humor. Try to picture how much Rebekah would have had to hustle to bring enough water for ten thirsty camels in her little jug she is carrying on her shoulder. When she gets back to camp, her older and protective brother sees the ring on her nose and the bracelets on her arm—signs of an engagement--but agrees to allow Rebekah to go to a place she has never seen with a man that she does not know to marry a man she has never met. And then, in a surprising twist, Rebekah actually is given a choice and she consents! Unheard of in that time and place!

The marriage of Isaac and Rebekah was like many others of that time: based upon the wealth of Abraham and the size of the dowry, but in this case it was distinct because of God's role in the matchmaking and the actual consent of the couple. Don't forget, most marriages at that time were arranged marriages—not marriages based on love as they are today.

Through it all, from the beginning, we can see a chain of blessing from God. God has blest Abraham and that blessing has been shared with Eliezer. God blesses Rebekah's entire family and the blessing to Abraham is now passed on to Isaac. In our story today, we see clearly God's loving-kindness and faithfulness

to Abraham, to his servants, to Isaac, to Rebekah and to a new generation.

We heard the worries of Eliezer as he wonders how to fulfill his mission from Abraham to find a wife for Isaac in a faraway place. The story of Abraham last week nearing the point of sacrificing his son Isaac in response to God highlights for us that faith is difficult. There is no “easy button” we can push to make it all come together sometimes. Faith is less a state of mind than it is a state of relationship, and a life lived in relationship with others tests our loyalty and our commitment.

If we were to summarize what we have learned about faith from the first families of the Bible over the first three weeks of our journey through Genesis, we might say that the story of Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael points to faith as a deep and abiding knowledge that God is with us and God hears our cries, even during the wilderness periods of life that inevitably come our way.

Besides the miracle of love in our story today, we can see in the faith of Abraham and Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael, Isaac and Rebekah a radical trust in the God who provides. Abraham trusted God to work through his servant and bring Isaac a life partner with whom he would find joy and love and be able to build a family. Abraham’s servant trusted that if he prayed with faith, God would give him a specific sign that would enable him to identify the right woman for Isaac. Rebekah trusted that if she went with this servant, she would meet and marry a man who with whom she could build a family and a happy and prosperous life.

It’s a great story of the people who God has called and to whom God has made promises and how those promises were fulfilled in their lives but, after that Bible Study, what does it have to do with us? Without micromanaging their lives, God offers guidance for them to live their lives and thrive in spite of difficulties and dilemmas.

Abraham doesn’t know of a wife for Isaac to fulfill God’s promise without God’s guidance. Abraham’s servant, Eliezer, doesn’t know where to find that wife and whom to choose without God’s guidance. Rebekah’s brother, Laban, sees the hand of God in the betrothal and recognizes God’s guidance. God offers guidance and His wisdom to them, but that same guidance and wisdom is not limited to them.

God offers guidance to us as well. We are sometimes blind to the God-moments in our lives and don’t see them at all. Sometimes we chalk the blessings we receive to coincidence and refuse to acknowledge God’s guidance and the hand of God at work. Sometimes we close our eyes and harden our hearts to God-at-work in our lives and, because of pride, give ourselves all the credit or all the responsibility. But if we confess a faith in a loving and active God, we need to acknowledge the God-moments in our lives, and not just acknowledge them.

There are all kinds of transitions that can happen in our lives. Relationships end by death or separation, jobs are lost, sometimes we need to leave our homes and friends and families, health issues come up, sometimes unexpectedly. Through all of those, Eliezer gives us the recipe for success: pray and trust in God.

There are endings in our lives but there are also beginnings: we may receive the gift of a new relationship, a new job might open up, perhaps a family is extended by a birth or a new marriage, a move to a new home or a new town happens, a health crisis or problem is resolved. Eliezer gives us the response for those joys: give thanks to the God of blessing.

The nation celebrates its independence this weekend and I suspect that our founding fathers felt no guarantee that their efforts to separate from England would be successful. No doubt there were people who could not see possibilities but only obstacles. No doubt there were people who had no faith that there was something better. But our founding fathers stepped out in faith and we reap the benefits of freedom.

News issues in our country and our world affect our church and families. Not that long ago, we agonized over a possible separation in the United Methodist Church; we haven't heard much about that lately. The coronavirus pandemic has caused major changes in how we live our lives and how we "do church." Race relations and questions of systemic racial bias has come to the forefront again. And these things may not even affect our daily lives compared to heat and humidity and too much or too little rain that threatens the success of crops and the health of animals.

I think we can focus on the challenges and sufferings and trials that affect us or we can look for and acknowledge the grace and presence and wisdom and guidance that God has given and which God still promises. We can focus on what we do not have and fail to give thanks and take advantage of what we already have been given.

There are blessings in every situation which God has already provided. There are gifts in every opportunity for us to move forward and to tell the good news of Jesus to a world which too often focuses on the negative and what is wrong. It might not be a wife for Isaac, but as we search for what we need to build our lives and build a church that is truly a light to our community and to the world and reaches out to serve and care for the needs of our community and our world, we can use what we already have, but also trust that there is still more to come.

God's love, God's grace, God's gifts are never-ending and always just what we need and more. "Rebekah" shows up at just the right time and at just the right place, offers a drink and also waters the camels. I can only imagine what God still has in store for us!