

Watering Camels  
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Genesis 24

We continue our summer series in Genesis. First was Adam and Eve dismissed from the garden. Then, Cain and Abel – witnesses to the disruption that now exists among those who live in paradise lost.

Then the call to Abraham and Sarah – first laughing **at** God, then laughing **with** God at the covenant God is making with humanity – sojourning to uncharted territory, and finally receiving their son of laughter – Isaac – in the years when Medicare won't pay for a stroller.

Our story picks up – Isaac is no longer a child, but he's still a bachelor at 40 – and his father is anxious to insure the promise of many generations to come will be a reality.

Genesis 24 is the longest chapter in Genesis – which is why we'll summarize part of it. It is a delightful narrative – filled with humor and faithfulness.

**["Reader's Theater" of Genesis 24 – selected verses, but most of the chapter!]**

Last Sunday, I was officiating at an offsite, outside wedding. It took place at 5:30. You remember the temperature a week ago. I was told that I would be looking into the sun, so I put some sunscreen on my face.

There I was, black robe, waiting as the wedding party processed in; staring into the evening sun. It was hot. My forehead began to glisten. By the time I got five minutes into the service, the sunscreen had begun to drip into my eyes, which began to burn and water. By the time we did the vows, tears were streaming down my face.

Everyone thought, "Oh isn't that wonderful. The pastor is so moved by this marriage!" Sometimes even the best laid plans don't turn out as you expect. And often, things are not always exactly as they appear. Such is the case in our story today.

Sarah has died. And by securing a bit of land in which to bury her, Abraham, the once landless one, plants the flag of God's covenant in a location. Next, the job is to find a well-credentialed wife for son Isaac so the promise may continue.....as Abraham isn't getting any younger.

But Abraham wants no Canaanite match showing up on Isaac's eHarmony.com. He is appropriately Canaanite averse – the Canaanites do not know his God; their religion is run through with immorality.<sup>1</sup> What to do? Get Isaac a wife from back home where everyone knows who your momma and daddy are.

But Isaac is not the sharpest pencil in the box. Abraham can't send him to find a wife. Isaac will find the homeland too enticing, stay there, and undo all they've accomplished. Besides, Isaac is still mourning his momma. Abraham knows long apron strings do not put Isaac in a good mind for wife-picking. (Isaac's wisdom will be questioned again next week).

So, Abraham entrusts the whole matter to God,<sup>2</sup> working through the servant he sends to find bachelorette number one. The servant travels – 500 miles mind you – with a herd of camels and a boatload of gifts. His first stop? The village watering hole! Looking for a good, industrious woman? First and best place to look – the village well. (Both Jacob and Moses will find wives at a well).

The servant is ready to survey the possibilities, but he's also a man of prayer. He stops, and prays – his prayer is personal, pointed and discerning. "Here's what I'm looking for God. Let one such woman be here."

Before he barely gets out an AMEN, a beautiful young maiden named Rebekah offers the stranger a drink. And before the servant can say "Oy, vey God", Rebekah goes all out and offers to water his ten camels. The text says the servant does not immediately know if this is the woman. He gazes at her in silence to learn whether the Lord had made his journey successful.<sup>3</sup> A period of discernment, reflection and surely observation – all good things. And, he's got plenty of time to do so – ten camels; 500 miles thirsty; little jar; big trough.....

But each new jar-full confirms the hospitality, work-ethic, and the graciousness of this young woman. This is a GOOD CATCH!

The servant offers Rebekah gifts. (We'll skip over whether or not the nose ring is a biblical affirmation of body piercings!)

Rebekah invites the servant's entourage to the family home – continuing her spirit of hospitality. The servant is greeted by her family with food and lodging for him, for the men with him, and for the camels.

It should be noted here that Rebekah's brother Laban appears to know Abraham's God, using the sacred name – "Yahweh" – for the God of the covenant when he greets the servant. It should also be noted Laban gets religious **AFTER** seeing the two ounce gold nose ring, gold bracelets weighing a couple pounds, ten camels, and suitcases of more goodies to be negotiated!

You see, things are not always as they appear. Laban may not be a true believer; his theological language may be more calculating than sincere, But, he's not stupid either.<sup>4</sup>

But equally smart was father Abraham. Abraham knows that doing the work of God includes anticipating the reactions of others, so Abraham sent along an exceedingly generous dowry to increase the chances of success.

The servant is invited to take a seat at the dinner table, but before accepting a meal, the servant figures he better declare his purposes, "Let's be clear why I am here." He rehearses the whole story in detail. After hearing it, the family affirms God's presence was surely in this meeting.

In the end, Rebekah agrees to the arrangement, her family receives a boatload of bridal shower gifts for themselves, then the servant and Rebekah return to Canaan.

When they get there, Rebecca sees Isaac out wandering in the field. (The Hebrew is unclear as to what he is doing out there by himself!). Anyway, they are introduced, and Isaac takes Rebekah into his MOTHER'S tent.

Now we can get all psychological about what **THAT** might mean, but suffice it to say, it certainly establishes Rebekah as the new matriarch of the promise.

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What do I love about this story? The workings of God in this story are not spectacular, magical oddities. No voice from the clouds; no burning bush. While God sometimes does such things, often it is only as the eyes of faith look back – as Israel recorded this story – do we discern that in the seemingly natural sequence of affairs, there is more than meets the eye. This text takes human experiences seriously; God's activity is in the background. The story stresses not the leadership of God so much as the faithful following of the actors. It describes not a deterministic, divine management of events; to the contrary, it shows that human activity can shape the future, though not finally stymie God's purposes.<sup>5</sup>

The servant believes he has been led. The term "led" is used only once here in Genesis. Same language is in Psalm 23 – "He leads me beside still waters". This is not by a collar and a leash, but an often subtle, behind the scenes reality, and the willingness of the faithful to discern God's presence in daily activities. That's an amazing, mysterious, and magnificent partnership, of which you and I are heirs.

Son needs a wife? Get her from folks you know. Don't send Isaac; he's not up to it. Send your trusted servant. Pack lots of gifts; stop at the well; respond to hospitality and service; check out the family. Family – perceive an excellent match for sister. These are all good, discerning, thoughtful decisions from the players in this story. Exactly what God expects from the faithful.

My favorite part of this story? Rebekah! In a very early Bible story, a woman is featured. **Rebekah** – not Isaac – parallels Abraham as she continues the faithful activity of leaving home and family and venturing forth that furthers God's purposes. Rebekah has a strong, decisive mind of her own. And Abraham wants that. When he is giving servant instructions, he says, "Let the woman decide. If she doesn't want to come, that's OK." When the servant wants to leave with Rebekah immediately, but the family wants her to stay ten days, she makes the decision. She goes.

One rabbi I was reading said perhaps instead of saying "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" we should say "the God of Abraham, Rebekah and Jacob."

Rebekah displays generous hospitality; a willingness to go the second mile. A graciousness and an industriousness that will reappear again as the Genesis story continues. Lucky for Isaac, she will prove more than adequate to take her place in Sarah's tent.

Theologian Paul Tillich says that faith involves risk and uncertainty. We are never sure how things will turn out. But there is also often more going on than meets the eye. You and I are called to prayerfully, thoughtfully, deliberately go about the tasks of the day, trusting in the end that God is very much in the midst of it all, and with the eyes of faith looking back, we will see it has been very much so. Thanks be to God. AMEN.

1. Walter Brueggemann, Interpretation Commentary on Genesis.
2. *ibid.*
3. The New Interpreter's Bible, Commentary on Genesis
4. Brueggemann, *op. cit.*
5. *ibid.*