

Sermon for Sunday, July 9, 2023

We're continuing to take a closer look today at the story of God's people in Genesis – and what a messy story it is! – and we hear now of Abraham's plan to get a good bride for his son Isaac. Yes, Isaac. The one whom he was ready to kill, but God changed the plan.

As I said last week, we have heard little of the growing up years of Isaac. But now it's time, Abraham says, for his son to have a wife and start up on the next generation. Sarah, the mother of the boy, had recently died. Perhaps the young man was still grieving and his father wanted him to snap out of it. Perhaps Abraham had waited until Sarah's death to find a spouse for Isaac, since Sarah would most likely not find anyone who was good enough for her boy, in the pattern for mothers of sons even today. Or maybe Abraham knew that he was very old and wanted to tend to this prior to his own death.

We don't know for certain, but Abraham decides it's time.

Does he say anything to Isaac about this? After all, Isaac is the person who is getting married.

No, Abraham says to his closest manservant, "Go get us a bride for the boy. Not a Canaanite one. A girl from where we used to live. Bring her back for him. Swear to me that you'll do this."

The servant, not surprisingly, says, "what do I do if I find a girl and she won't come? After all, she doesn't know to whom she's going to be married. She might want a look-see first, examine the goods, as it were. Should I then come back, get Isaac, and bring him there?"

Abraham looks at the servant as if he's not the brightest of guys and says, "Nope. You're not taking Isaac there. Either she comes or the whole deal is off."

I don't know about you, but I surely wouldn't want to be the servant in this story. It feels like an impossible task. What if he finds someone back in the old country, and she doesn't want to come? What if he finds someone, brings her back, and Isaac says 'how is it that I have no say in this?'

And then the servant is sent off, but he isn't traveling light. Ten camels. A bunch of gifts. Assorted helpers. If he's going to find someone, and impress that girl enough to convince her and her family that this is good, he's got to show that Abraham's family is worth sending to girl into.

The servant prays, once he gets there: "here I am at the town well, Lord. Send some girls here. If I ask one for some water and she offers not only to bring me some water but also to water these ten camels of mine, then I'll know she's the one."

Sure enough, out comes Rebekah, a cousin of Abraham's, to fill her water jar. The servant asks the questions, she responds as he had prayed for. Bingo! First shot, and it's the right one! So the servant gives her all sorts of jewelry – including a nose ring, although we're not going to dwell on that – and asks her if he and the camels and the rest of the entourage can stay at her family's house for the night. And off she skips to ask if her parents are willing to do that.

This is the Genesis equivalent of some guy showing up and saying "I saw your really beautiful daughter and I'm an agent from Hollywood and I want to make her a star." Slightly icky, but also strangely fascinating. Apparently the family is fascinated as well, because they say to Rebekah "do you want to go?" And she promptly says "yes, Daddy, I really really do. Look at the pretty jewelry he gave me!"

Again, slightly icky, but it's a different era, so we'll let it pass.

So off they go on the camels, back into the desert, all the way across to where Abraham dwells in Beersheba. As they get close to where Abraham lives, they run into Isaac, who is out tending sheep.

And once again, it is unclear that Isaac has been told yet that his father has sent the manservant out to find the bride. He sees camels coming. Rebekah spots him from her camel. He starts walking toward the camels. Can you picture it in slo-mo in some romantic movie? Music playing in the background as they first lay eyes on

each other...and then Rebekah is so stunned by him, she falls off her camel. Now it's a like a rom-com movie like "Sleepless in Seattle", written by Nora Ephron. Rebekah asks the servant, "who's that?" and the servant says "that's your future husband."

And because it's a few thousand years ago and this is how they did things in those days, she puts her veil on to be modest. And then all of a sudden they're at the encampment, and Isaac takes this gorgeous young woman into his mother's tent, yes, his mother who just died a little while ago, and yes I know it's strange, but maybe they have a shortage of tents, or they're into recycling...

... and they lie together, and that's that. No big wedding celebration, just into the tent and we're done. It was a long time ago. There were no caterers around, and no wedding singer or DJ. But Isaac and Rebekah have consummated their union.

I think the most amazing line in the whole story is the last one: "So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death." Not "Isaac was thrilled with his new wife and the fact that they were now set to start the next generation." Not "Isaac started thinking it was time now to make a new tent."

No. He was comforted after his mother's death. Not necessarily the thing you'd want to hear in a love story, but as I said last week, the family story of God's people isn't always a romance. Sometimes it is a strange dark comedy. I wonder if his mother was the one who helped him adjust when he and his father had come down from the mountain where his dad almost killed him. His mother, who had waited so long for a son, and now finally had one, and was grieved to see how silent he was after that experience. Of course he felt her loss.

Not so much of a rom-com now, but a serious bit of work: the continuation of what God promised, creating a great nation of descendants who followed the one true God. And the protagonists were human beings, with all the human flaws and joys and griefs that human beings have. And the world was shifting around them and was sometimes a dangerous place.

Not unlike the present day.

God was present. God helped assure that the right person was found for Isaac. Not the perfect person - we're going to hear more about that as the story of Isaac and his family continue - but the right person for that situation. God walked with them then, as God walks with us now. God worried and fussed over them as God does now.

Oftentimes we have a romantic vision in our minds of what our lives might be. And we think because we're good people who are trying to follow God as best we can, that we'll have that perfect life. But this world isn't heaven, though we have our heavenly moments. We are surprised by love. We are shattered by grief. We are transformed by joys and troubles. We pray. God walks with us. God knows. God understands.

This story, like all the ancient stories, reminds us that the goal isn't a rom-com or a television show with an ideal family. The goal is doing the best we can while serving the God who created us and loves us beyond measure. Perhaps our task in this time is to live fully into the emotions we feel, into the challenges and the joys, into the changes that swirl around us, and know that we feel what we feel, and God is still walking with us. Someday, we get paradise. For now, we get all the feelings and a bunch of little glimpses of paradise, in a newborn's face, in ancient hands, in a zucchini plant that takes over half the garden, in a full moon so bright in the night sky that we are awakened from slumber and amazed by it. And it is all blessing, isn't it?

Blessed be this imperfect world, where everything isn't tied up neatly with a bow on it, where some days are amazing and some are stunningly painful, but where God's presence reminds us that another glimpse may be coming soon. And blessed be each and every one of us, no matter our situation, as we offer a prayer to our God, be that prayer one of thanks or help or I'm sorry or where the heck are you now? Blessed be us. Blessed be. Blessed.

Amen.