

A Wife for Isaac
A sermon by David Roquemore
First Presbyterian Church, Newton
July 5, 2020

Genesis 24: 34-38, 42-49, 58-67

You may wonder sometimes why the lectionary includes stories like this one; it is hard to make a good sermon out of it. It seems innocent, but the more you read it and read into it, you begin to see that it isn't all that edifying, really. You begin to wonder if it has anything to say. I think it does, and we will have to tease that out of it. Let's try.

So let's ask one of these young girls here today, would you do this? Would you marry your first-cousin once-removed? The son of your grandfather's brother? Ewww, they must be OLD! And yes, they live far away, wherever it is that your grandfather's brother went, years ago, when he left us here. Would you like to go with this servant to meet and marry this man, or would you rather stay here?

That is the choice Rebekah has. She gets no choice, in fact. She is asked whether she will go with the servant back to Isaac or not, but even there, the choice is defined for her. You can do this, or that. Choose. She doesn't get to determine the course of her own life and future. The choice is set up beforehand, by men.

Not much of a choice, by our standards. She doesn't get to meet the man. She gets no say in the matter. She doesn't even have a courtship. She meets him, he takes her, and makes her his wife.

In our day, we would argue that she should have her own sovereign choices. But we live in a vastly different culture. Our culture would reel, aghast, at the idea of an arranged marriage. But that culture assumed that love would come between husband and wife after the marriage. Our culture has that reversed, and so this story seems strange to us.

Abraham has arranged all of this with the servant, whom tradition names Eliezer. The servant is instructed to go back to Haran to find a wife for Isaac. He is to go there, way up in the north of Syria (and it is still there!) where Abraham's people, his tribe, his relatives live. Abraham is clear: go there and find a suitable woman. If you cannot, well, whatever you do, you see to it that Isaac does not marry one of these local women. Canaanite women. Women who follow the strange and sinful practices of the native people of Canaan.

And so Eliezer went to the home country on Abraham's and Isaac's behalf. He chooses Isaac's wife, Rebekah, from the crowd at the well.

He has these conversations, these prayers, in which he says things like, "God, if a woman comes up and says this specific thing, then she's the one." But the specific thing is something that any polite person might say. He is no fool. He knows that many – most? Lots? Some people? – would offer to water the camels. So he says, Lord, let the girl you have chosen be one who would do that. And she does!

Introverts never quite know what to say or do, but some people seem to be so smooth, they never have a problem. Rebekah comes across this way to me. She handles Eliezer quite well. Think about it: to dip

the pitcher of water into the well, give it to this dusty stranger to drink from, and then what? It would be very rude to pour it out and rinse it before filling it again, even though that is what one would want to do. She can't bring herself to do that to this man, even if he is a stranger. The culture of that time was very kind and solicitous to strangers. So she says she will also water the camels. After doing that, she has to rinse off the camel spit, and so she does. No one is offended! And she has clean water to take back home. A masterful strategy.

Eliezer follows Rebekah back to her house, and meets her family. They are very welcoming; after all, Eliezer must represent someone rich, given the presents that he lavishes upon Rebekah on meeting her. Laban is Rebekah's brother, who knows a good thing when he sees it. We will see him later on, when Rebekah's son comes looking for a wife. That son is Jacob, and as they say, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. But we get ahead of ourselves. Laban is sharp, and takes over the negotiation from his parents. He will handle this fellow. He wants them to stay a while, so he can get to know him and perhaps con him. But Eliezer is in a hurry to leave, and so he takes Rebekah – basically he buys her from her family – and leaves the next morning.

Isaac seems aloof. He doesn't seem to be involved in the discussions about his wife. He seems to leave that to Abraham and Eliezer. In fact, he seems to be uninvolved in the discussions about God's greater plan. I suspect that after Abraham tried to sacrifice him, he may have been somewhat cool toward his father's God. He certainly isn't a big player in this drama. But he has to have a wife, so that he can have children, specifically sons, and more specifically, Jacob. So he is involved even if not enthusiastic.

What do we do with this? Especially today, when we are celebrating July th, with all that that means to us. With a pandemic. With racial unrest. With a rapidly changing culture all around us.

We see Abraham, the master of all of this, demanding things of Eliezer. We see Eliezer, the loyal servant, whose trust is commanded by Abraham and who must follow his master's wishes. We see Laban, who seeks his own good above all else. We see Isaac, who lets Eliezer get him a wife. And we see Rebekah, who really has no choice but to go along with the plans of all these men. In all of these characters, in the interplay between them, we hear hints of the guiding hand of God in all of it. God isn't really named very much. God is not involved in the conversations. But God guides all of this in his quiet mysterious way.

We saw with Hagar and Ishmael that Sarah wanted to force God's hand, to give Abraham a son but not the son promised according to God's plan. We saw with the binding of Isaac that God tested Abraham, giving him this horrible, unacceptable command, to sacrifice his only son that he loves. Here we see a third instance of the overarching guiding providence of God. God works not against the plans of Sarah, not in the midst of Abraham's terrible test, but in the ordinary interplay of human people. We see that God works, even when we don't see, when we are not aware of his working.

I believe that God is working among us even now. We don't see it, most of the time, because we look for dramatic things, miraculous things. I think it was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who observed that we tend to explain things scientifically, and everywhere we can't find a scientific explanation, we say, "that's where God works." And as we go along, these gaps in our scientific knowledge get smaller and smaller. So the "God of the gaps" gets less and less important and relevant. That isn't how it is at all, but we tend to believe it. We look for the God of the gaps to intervene and do things despite and against the

way things regularly work. But most of the time, that isn't how God works. Most of the time God works in and through the ordinary actions of people, to bring about his goals and plans.

July 4, 1776 was a big deal. The Continental Congress declared independence from Great Britain, which certainly got a reaction from the Crown! The war was already going on, and this didn't help. For the rest of the year, things went badly for the colonists. George Washington was defeated in New York, and retreated to New Jersey. Things were not going well at all. The British certainly expected to win, and to put down this revolution, what George III called the "Presbyterian Rebellion."

Then Washington did something unexpected, and frankly dangerous. He took about half of his army, crossed the Delaware River near Trenton, NJ, during the night, a freezing cold night. It was Christmas night, and the British and Hessian soldiers had celebrated, drunk a fair bit, and were asleep. A couple of dozen were killed in the attack, it was too cold for their guns to work, and most of them surrendered. It was a stunning victory for the colonists. Washington only lost two men, to frostbite, because they didn't have shoes!

One could say that God was working in the actions of Washington that night. One could also say that Washington was a man who took a desperate gamble that worked. A lesser army of rebels threw off the more powerful soldiers of the Powers-that-Be. Ben Robertson wrote in his wonderful memoir of life in the upcountry of South Carolina that, when he was a boy in the decades before WWI, his elderly aunts used to talk of the Civil War in similar fashion: a lesser army of freedom-loving independence fighters tried to separate from a more powerful country. Of course, the two situations are different, and Robertson knew that. But we can see how the rhetoric and the mythology become entwined, so that those, say here in Newton, who believe in a Lost Cause can cloak it in Independence Day rhetoric.

But suppose God was working in both those wars. And suppose that God works even now, leading us to a society that is more fair, more just, more accepting, less threatening, less terrible for people of color, for outsiders and strangers of every kind. It could be!

One never knows what God is doing, or where God is working, you see. That is one thing that makes being a Christian so exciting: God keeps popping up if you look for him. Something happens, and if you turn quickly, you may just see his coattails as he makes his escape! God is active, and God is on the move, but God acts in the most ordinary things and exchanges of our lives to bring about amazing and sometimes world-altering consequences.

Rebekah is Isaac's wife, and so becomes the mother of Jacob and Esau. Jacob she raises particularly, so that he is much like her brother Laban, and perhaps like her, after all. He goes and is cheated by Laban, tricked into marrying two of his daughters, who become the mothers of his twelve sons. And they end up in Egypt, and so the story goes. So Rebekah is important to the entire tale. We don't know what God is up to, what God is doing. But we do know this: God's purpose is always good, always loving, always seeking to redeem and sanctify the various human scoundrels he recruits and uses in his plan. God always does this, for us!

Thanks be to God! Amen.