

This courtship of Isaac and Rebekah is a tragically neglected foundation of faith and where we find faith! In a culture which searches for visible signs, driven toward scientific proof, facts to justify our opinion and falls for too many quackeries; this simple story narrates the work of God not as spectacular fireworks, magic or oddities, but as a lifelong discernment of blessing, hospitality, loyalty, trust, leadership and love.

This is not simply a romantic novella of love at first sight. Rebekah alighting from her camel to see Isaac working in the field, a latter-day Eve recognizing Adam's sweat. This story is important to us because finding a partner for Abraham's heir defines Faith that comes as an affirmation, not a suspicion, Trust rather than searching for doubts.

- How many of us have been told by GOD to build an Ark to preserve a remnant of the world?
- How many of us, can identify with Sarah getting pregnant at 80?
- Who among us has sacrificed their child... Not that at times you wanted to kill, but to sacrifice to God?
- How many have turned aside seeing a Burning Bush?
- Have you witnessed Jesus walk across water, or a prophet bringing the dead back to life.

I have not.

There are instead here, just as in our lives, unexpected interactions between pairs of people: In the first 10 verses between Abraham and his unnamed trusted servant. Throughout the Bible, when there is a choice between historic figures (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Jesus) and an unnamed person, particularly a trusted servant, which are we do you imagine we are to identify?

in 11-27 between that servant and Rebekah;

over the next 30 verses between the servant and Rebekah's family; 62-67 Isaac and Rebekah.

The first scene sets up the problem. Abraham has had a life filled with BLESSINGS, the Birth of Isaac and his growing to be an adult, when eventually Sarah dies. Reflecting on their life, Abraham and Sarah left home, family and Nation to follow GOD, and together they received a family, a respected name, and a home in this new place shown by GOD. Nearly all of us in Green Valley can identify with this time of reflection, and with the thought which follows... SO having received Blessings and Prosperity, what do we want to have happen with what we received? Who is going to carry on for us?

The Bible next describes a Middle Eastern custom for creating an intimate, sacred oath. We have to explain it, because it is so obscure to us that it raises questions. Similar to the question of "What does a Scotsman wear under his kilt", Abraham demonstrates the depth of his trust in this servant by literally placing his life and inheritance in the servant's hand.

The passage was quite long to read, so we omitted part of the conversation between Abraham and the Servant. Where the Servant asks "What happens if I go to Abraham's Nation, to his home and his family, and there is no daughter, or they do not accept her marrying Isaac?" Abraham affirms that GOD will send an Angel before you to prepare the way... But if by her Free Will she should choose to not accept, then at least you fulfilled your responsibility in this oath. We often speak of Angels who brooded over the face of Creation, who guarded the Garden of Eden, who appeared to Mary, who sat on the stone at Jesus' tomb. But the subtlety of Abraham's faith is that we probably will never see Angels in our lives, that does not mean that GOD has not put them there for us, or that We are not being prepared for by God.

This week a new edition of Presbyterian Outlook Magazine came out, dedicated to the issue of Gun Violence. The issue is not "guns!" The focus is the violence and trauma that exists in our culture. For the

last three years, the #1 cause of death for Children was not Measles, Mumps, Rubella or COVID, The #1 Cause of Death of Children in these United States was Gun Violence. In one Article, the author describes the difference of how we feel possessing a gun, having in your hand the ability to take another person's life. How different to know you have this Angel with you, guiding you through whatever may come, instead of having in your hand the power to kill?

A first answer to the problem of what to do to fulfill this oath comes in what the Bible regularly refers to as HESED, the Hebrew word for COVENANT LOYALTY. Among Middle Eastern peoples there is a responsibility as people of faith that whenever there is a stranger, you are required to provide HOSPITALITY, welcome and care, no matter who they are, because we came into this life with nothing and whether directly, or through other people, we have received welcome and care we did not deserve.

As the story shifts to the second scene, the servant has to decide how he is going to do to fulfill Abraham's desire for a partner for Isaac, as an act of faith in GOD? Rather than casting lots as happened in the story of Jonah and in the New Testament deciding who would replace Judas as a Disciple; rather than consulting an Oracle as King Saul did, or asking a Prophet as happened with several of the Kings; instead, the Trusted servant knows that throughout life he has BEEN LED, so he will trust himself and his mission to being led. GOD has done nothing directly. There has been no sign or signal or proof.

That simple verb of BEING LED occurs no-where else in Genesis.

Its characteristics refer to "guidance", as in the wilderness wanderings of Exodus, and in "personal well-being in times of stress" as in the 23rd Psalm. Naming absolute confidence in GOD's care: *"He leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."*

The servant declares, I am going to wait by the well, and if a woman offers HESED, that covenant loyalty of hospitality and caring, then I will be certain she is the One sent from GOD. In this way, faith is not so much an emphasis on GOD's Leadership as on the FOLLOWER'S TRUST IN FOLLOWING GOD.

The humor of this story is that Rebekah does exactly what the Servant outlined. When greeted, she not only greets him, she offers the stranger a drink, and volunteers to water his camels... Realize that she is fetching water to fill a trough by the single pitcher full, to satisfy 10 thirsty Camels! And when done, she then offers a place of rest for him and for his camels. Without warning, he puts a gold ring on her and bracelets on her arms. So much for courtship!

Meeting Rebekah's family, this is the same Laban who will continually attempt to trick Jacob, and pursue after to bring his daughters Rachel and Leah home, except with this servant of Abraham, Laban defers to his sister Rebekah whatever is her wish and Rebekah chooses to go!

Isaac's and Rebekah's is to be an arranged marriage, yet seeing one another they fall in love. This is in fact the only time in the Old Testament that the word LOVE is used between a man and woman!

Years ago, I had a couple in the church who were Korean, who had met for the first time at their wedding. I recall on their 30th anniversary asking them about love. She was quick to describe that Americans believe you need to fall in love and then marry, in an arranged marriage you marry demonstrating that the families approve of this union then you learn to love one another.

Prior to coming to Green Valley, I served a church in a resort community which became a destination site for weddings, as such I did as many as 30 weddings a year, which meant roughly every other week, that involves a lot of pre-marital counseling. We were fortunate that of those over 85% are still married, but there were a few times I had to tell the couple that there could be no wedding. One of which was when the couple described how much their families were against their marriage. What I suggested was that they postpone a year, to try to resolve the problems with their families. If after that time, they could not

resolve their issues yet the couple still wanted to be married, we could then go ahead. Not forcing the issue, not giving up, instead daily demonstrating their commitment, their love for their families and for each other. Their families came to accept and affirm their relationship, and we celebrated the wedding.

Genesis 24 has a simple but important conclusion, that Isaac brought Rebekah into Sarah's Tent, AS SUCH she became the Matriarch of this family, keeping the traditions and memories of who they are and what they believe, and Isaac was comforted.