

July 5, 2020

'Rebekah, a Woman of Decision'
(Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49. 58-67)

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"Father Abraham had many kids, many kids had Father Abraham
I am one of them, and so are you. So, let's all praise the Lord!"

Over the past weeks, we've been traveling along through the book of Genesis. We have shared stories of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar, and their kids, Ismael and Isaac. We have heard how Sarah and Abraham left their home to enter a new land in response to a call from God. God promised them descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and that they would be a blessing to the world. God promised to make of them many nations. Two weeks ago, we heard that Sarah and Abraham, after many years, still did not have children. Sarah grew impatient and offered her Egyptian slave Hagar to Abraham, to have a child with Hagar to fulfill God's promise. Hagar gave birth to Abraham's son Ishmael.

Later, Sarah did conceive and bore a son and named him Isaac. Sarah, worried about Isaac's inheritance being shared by Ishmael, demanded that Hagar and Ishmael be thrown out of the family camp into the wilderness. Abraham agreed with this! God saved Hagar and Ishmael and promised to make of them many nations. Last week, we saw Abraham die after a long life. His two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, bury him together, as equal men.

All along the way, God made promises that were really hard to believe. Promises which God made good on, despite much laughter and lack of faith in them. Today, in Genesis 24, some time before Abraham's death, the promises of God again seem unlikely. Sarah, Isaac's mother has died. The chapter begins, "Now, Abraham was old, well advanced in years..."

This first generation is beginning to pass away. The promises of God have made good so far. However, Isaac, of the next generation, is not even married. They begin to wonder, 'How can God's promises of many Descendants and the making of great nations, come true?' Will there even BE descendants? Will the promises all end here? Those are the questions that haunt them!

We all know what it's like to live with those questions. We also live in times of uncertainty and change, and we don't know how things will go. As we wait and watch our country, our world... respond in various ways to the Coronavirus Pandemic, as we wait and watch our country become polarized over many issues, as we wait and watch as racial injustice unravels and people step up to protest; we wonder if any good could possibly come out of all this. What does the future hold? Will things ever go back to the way they were (or should they?) Is this the end of the life we've known?!

Those are some of the questions being asked in today's story. Which means that this story is our story. These are the human story. Often, when I research Hebrew Scriptures, I will choose a commentary by a Jewish author. I find that the perspective is that these are not just someone else's story from long, long ago. We ARE these stories! They are personal and timeless.

We know how it is in the moments when the baton is passed from generation to generation. We know how it is to not know how things will play out. So, as we walk through today's story, I invite you to wonder - who are you in this story? Because each of us has a place in the woven fabric of God's story!

Today, for now, we leave Hagar and Ishmael on their journey with God and God's good promises for their future. We are now traveling with Abraham and Isaac as they live toward their promises. As the story opens, Abraham is very concerned about finding a wife for his son Isaac! He wanted Isaac to marry a nice Mesopotamian young woman – absolutely not a Canaanite woman. (Prejudice rears its head early in the story!) The elderly Abraham decides that he will be the tool to ensure that the promises from God are made possible. After all, Isaac is about 40 years old by this time...it's late in the game. Abraham wonders if God is waiting for him to act.

God goes along with Abraham's idea – they partner up on delivering God's promises. Abraham sends his servant back to his homeland to find a wife for Isaac. This servant brings ten camels and other gifts and travels there. Just outside the city, this servant makes a stop by a water well. Here's one thing to notice: a well in those days was much like match.com in our day. It's where people meet one another, including possible spouses.

Abraham's servant begins to pray by the well: "God, if only you will make this search a success! Here I am, standing by this water. When I say to a woman, "Please give me a little water from your jar to drink, and she says, 'Drink, and I will draw water for you camels as well,' let her be the woman for Isaac!" WHAT A PRAYER! But, wonder of wonders, even before the servant is finished praying, a woman named Rebekah has come to the well!

And it happens according to the servant's prayer! God, the servant and Rebekah each do their part. Still, the servant has his doubts. How can he know that she is really the ONE? Even after she waters his ten camels! Did you know that a camel can drink 20 – 30 gallons of water at a time? So, Rebekah draws 200-300 gallons of water, using one jug.

Still, the servant worries that he could be wrong about this. However, once he learns that Rebekah is a part of Abraham's people, he is convinced. Upon Rebekah's invitation, he goes with her to spend the night with her family. He shares the whole story with Rebekah's brother Laban, and her father Bethuel. He tries to convince them that she is the woman to marry Isaac. Again, he worries that they won't be convinced. What if they say no?

But her family believes the servant's story and say yes – she can go with the servant to marry Isaac if she agrees. Rebekah answers, "I will." And so, she leaves her home, because of God's promises, to be a blessing for the world. Just as Sarah and Abraham had done before her! They set off, with all those camels. Eventually, Rebekah see Isaac in the distance. The passage says that she quickly slipped off her camel. Actually, the Hebrew words say that she falls off the camel.

Isaac and Rebekah get married in Sarah's tent. The grief that remains because of Sarah's death is lightened upon Rebekah's arrival! So, the baton passes on to the next generation. God's promises, as always, prove true! That's the beginning of Rebekah's story. We'll hear more of Rebekah and her children next week as their story continues!

Again, what is so amazing is how many people it takes to make up the fabric of this story. The way each one of us makes a difference in God's story. In today's story, God is most certainly at work behind the scenes, through all people. Again, who are you in this old, but ever new story?

Are you Abraham? God is at work in his life as he worries about Isaac's and the family's future? Or are you Isaac? He knows he is a thread in the fabric, but is unsure exactly what to do.

Are you the servant? He is not one of the well known Biblical heroes, and yet with his courage and doubt, God works through him right at the edge of this story.

Or are you Rebekah, one strong and courageous young woman, traveling with God into the unknown?

Maybe you are Rebekah's family, watching their daughter leave them for her own life in Isaac's family? All they can do is send their child with their blessing and love, and trust that they have done the best for her.

Who are you in this old story? Who are you in the story of God's promises today – right now? Have you had moments when you could hear the 'voice' of God inviting you to become a thread in God's promises? How did you hear this invitation? How will you?

Many years ago, God had been calling me to become such a thread. I tentatively traveled in this journey as I grew, asked questions, became part of a church and worked toward a college degree. Sometime, about half way through college, I was driving to class. Suddenly, I noticed a beautiful rainbow in the sky ahead. I pulled my car over and studied that rainbow of promise more carefully. Then I 'heard' God from inside myself, ask me, "After all these years of travelling and preparing, it is time to decide if you are 'on the bus or off the bus. If you are 'on,' know that through all the ups and downs, I will always be with you!" That day, I made my commitment to ministry. How does God work in your life?

A constant theme in the Bible is that God works through ordinary people like you and me. We work to create a tapestry of God's promises and hope. You and I are, every day, also walking into an unknown future. We are not sure if things will ever be the same after this Coronavirus Pandemic, on our heightened attention to racial justice, on the division in our country over how to respond to this medical emergency, and much more. We are not even sure if things should go back to 'normal' in many ways.

I pray that we can still give thanks for what we have in life and to share that gratitude with others. I pray that you can hear your life as woven into the fabric of the story of God that will always continue. I pray that you can see that your life can be a blessing to the world.

These are God's ways of us finding peace in the middle of the storm, and blessings along the way of the adventure we call life. We, individually and as a church, have hard paths ahead. May we have eyes to see and feel the hand of God along the way. God makes good on promises – are you on the bus? Amen.