

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, July 9, 2023
10am

Text: Genesis 24

Theme: Anything but Ordinary: The Marriage of Isaac & Rebekah (Thirst)

[prayer]

Today in our Abrahamic story arc we begin the transition to the next generation. Sarah has died, Abraham is about to die, and God's great covenant plan for blessing the nations enters Stage 2 (so to speak).

This is one of the longest stories in the Bible, a whopping sixty-seven verses. It moves at a snail's pace compared to last week's anguished encounter with God on Mount Moriah last week, accomplished in just fourteen spare verses. One wonders how Isaac feels about his elderly father and God playing chicken with his life. But the narrator does not say. We are only told that the boy has reached adulthood and Abraham's wealth will shortly pass to him. So, it is time to find Isaac a wife.

Throughout Scripture there is an evolution in how God chooses to interact with human beings. God's relationship with Abraham is intimate and conversational – most of the Abraham stories feature him speaking directly with God or the angel of the LORD. But with the transition to the next generation, we see God relating to this chosen family in new ways.

God is definitely present in this story – His providential influence is evident in the choice of Rebekah as Isaac's wife. But I use the word 'influence' intentionally because God does not speak in this story. God does not command Abraham to find a wife for Isaac; God does not verbally answer the servant's prayer; God does not order Rebekah to leave her home. There is no voice from heaven; there is no angelic emissary. This time God's ways are more subtle. They are also more familiar, because in this story we see a reflection of how most of us normally experience the will of God in our lives: Not as an audible voice, but as the work of our intuition and discernment in partnership with the Holy Spirit.

[pause]

The servant's prayer in this story delights me every time. It is audaciously precise: "Dear God, make the person I am looking for do x, y, and z." And then, voila! That is what happens.

Let's be honest: We've all prayed that kind of prayer before. We may not have gotten the same instant and exact response that the servant got, but we have all prayed that prayer. We have all been tempted to treat God like a wish-fulfilling genie. As the comedian Flip Wilson once said, "I'm gonna pray now. Anyone want anything?"

The wise know that God is not a genie here to fulfill our wishes. But the wise also know that God *is* listening. The words of our prayers may frequently lack tact, the intentions of our prayers may sometimes be misplaced, but God is able to hear beyond those imperfections. God listens for and knows the hidden need that lies behind our prayers. We may lack the self-awareness to know what it is that we truly need, but God knows. God always knows.

What makes our prayers and the servant's prayer audacious is not the request. What makes them audacious is our belief that God is listening, that God is actively guiding our lives, correcting course, working His divine purposes through us – even in spite of us. *This* is an audacious thing to believe in a world that scorns the mystery of faith.

Jesus teaches us that we must be like little children to receive the kingdom of God (Mark 10:13-16). And little children do not mince their words; when they pray, they are wonderfully uninhibited. Why is that? Because they truly believe God loves them. And because God loves them, God is listening intently to the desires of their hearts.

One of the first prayers we teach our children is The Lord's Prayer. I cannot think of a more audacious prayer, a prayer that says things like:

"Thy kingdom come."

"Thy will be done."

"Give us our daily bread."

“Forgive us our trespasses.”

“Deliver us from evil.”

Notice that there is no ‘please’ in this prayer; there’s no prevaricating; all the verbs are in the imperative mood. Jesus has not taught us to pray with a spirit of timidity; Jesus has taught us to pray audaciously, to boldly bring our requests before God (Mark 11:24).

Still, while we are encouraged to do this, it can be tricky discerning when the answer to our prayers depends on God’s action, on our actions, or on both. At other times and in other places, Abraham (and Sarah) made choices based on their fear that God would not keep his promises. The birth of Ishmael and the abusive treatment of Hagar are one example. Last week, we witnessed Abraham’s struggle to trust God even when God’s command seemed to negate God’s promise. Abraham frequently wavers between indecision and rash decision; he has a hard time finding a happy medium.

But in today’s story, Abraham hits the right balance of trust and initiative. Abraham trusts God’s covenant promise: From Isaac will descend a mighty people who will be a blessing to the nations. This promise requires Isaac to have a wife. But Abraham does not idly wait for God to find Isaac that wife; instead, he discerns that the time is ripe, and he takes the matchmaking initiative. Even as he trusts God to provide what is necessary to fulfill God’s covenant promise, Abraham acknowledges that he has a role to play, too.

What makes Abraham’s initiative righteous is the spiritual posture from which he chooses to act. He does not act out of fear or impatience, nor does he attempt to circumvent the will of God; in fact, Abraham acknowledges to his servant that they very well may not find a wife for Isaac among Abraham’s kin. What makes Abraham’s initiative righteous is that he acts from his faith in God’s promise. Hebrews 11 says: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval” (vv. 1-2 NRSVUE). Abraham has enough faith in God’s promise to take proactive steps toward the future. But Abraham also has enough faith in God’s promise to hold his expectations about that future loosely and let them go if God does not grant him success this time.

Faith is not idle nor is it rash. Faith is a partnership with the will of God. Faith prays for wisdom and discernment. And then faith accepts God's invitation to step out in hope and co-create the future with God, trusting that God will be faithful to provide what is needed.

[pause]

Abraham's servant echoes his master's demonstration of faith. He prays boldly for a revelation of Isaac's future wife. But the nature of his prayer is less important than the fact that he chooses to ground his discernment in prayer in the first place. So often we skip that step, failing to ask God's blessing upon our endeavors. But discernment is a conversation with God; wisdom begins in prayer and it ends in praise.

Frequently God chooses to have that discerning conversation with us through other people, leading us to the people who become the answer to our prayers. A Jewish midrash (or story) demonstrates this well. It goes like this:

Rabbi Yose bar Halafta was asked by a Roman matron: "You claim that your God created the world in six days. Then what has He been doing since then?"

"All this time the Holy One has been making matches."

"That is no great feat!" declared the matron. "I can do that just as well."

But Rabbi Yose warned her: "It is not as simple as you think. The Holy One, blessed be He, considers making matches as difficult as splitting the Red Sea."¹

Friends, God is all about relationships. The Abrahamic narrative demonstrates that God's preferred method of blessing is through relationships. Surely there was an easier way for God to bring about God's covenant plan than engaging Abraham's very human and very messy family. Rabbi Yose is right: Partnering with these people – partnering with us! – is more difficult than parting the Red Sea. And yet

¹ Source: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/july-5-ordinary-time-14a-genesis-2434-38-42-49-58-67>

God chose them, and God chooses us, and God chooses the people around us to carry out the work of blessing. I am increasingly convinced that the most mundane relationships are often His most miraculous method for answering prayer. God brings unexpected people together for the flourishing of His creation.

[pause]

We have contemplated Abraham's initiative, and his servant's initiative. But we must not forget Rebekah's role in this tale. Even though Rebekah's marriage to Isaac happens in the context of a patriarchal society where she is a commodity traded between men, she is not without complete autonomy. In fact, it is Rebekah, not Isaac, who is the heir in spirit, if not name, to Abraham's faith. Like her father-in-law before her, God calls Rebekah from the comfort of her home and sends her to a faraway place to be a blessing. She is the continued mechanism of God's promise, the answer to Abraham and his servant's prayers, and a comfort to Isaac as he grieves the loss of his mother, Sarah.

But Rebekah would not have been this blessing if she had not taken her own initiative in God's plan. "Will you go with this man?" her family asked. And Rebekah said, "Yes, I will" (vv. 58-59). God does not compel her, neither does Abraham's servant and her family. Rebekah chooses to pour herself out in hospitality and blessing for the sake of God's future. And all she had to go on was faith.

May each of us answer God's call with the same kind of faithful initiative.

Amen.