

A Lectionary 14 7.9.23

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Focus Statement: The same God who created the cosmos cares about our relationships.

Well guys, after a rough couple weeks with Abraham, we finally get a sweet story. The whole story is long, sixty-seven verses, and the lectionary kind of pops us in and out randomly, so let's start by giving some overview of what's going on. Since we last saw Abraham and Isaac on a mountain in Moriah, thirty or so years have passed. Sarah died, at the ripe old age of one-hundred and twenty-seven and Abraham buried her in a field he purchased from Ephron the Hittite, formally anchoring Abraham and his family this place and this land. After Sarah's death, Abraham, verse one tells us, "was old, well advanced in years; and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things." Having declared that Isaac, child of the promise, would be the sole inheritor of all the land and property with which the Lord had blessed him, Abraham decided it was time for Isaac to get married and start a family of his own. So Abraham sent his most trusted servant back to Haran, where Abraham was from, to find a wife for Isaac among Abraham's own people. Important in the story, Abraham made it clear to the servant that Isaac was under no circumstances to return to Haran himself. The land they currently lived in was the land God had given them, and for Isaac to return to Haran would undo that promise. If the woman the servant found did not want to return with the servant to marry Isaac and instead wanted Isaac to come to her, the servant's obligation to find a wife was off.

So off the servant set, taking with him all manner of gifts to demonstrate that Abraham and Isaac could provide a good home for a potential wife and her family would want to allow her to return with him. The gifts show Abraham and the servant doing their due diligence

in this mission. In preaching class, Bishop Satterlee would tell us that while we should pray that the Holy Spirit would give us the words, it was not sufficient to pray and not study the text and expect the Holy Spirit to show up and bail you out. That, Bishop Satterlee would insist, is not how the Spirit works. The gifts are Abraham and the servant doing their own work and praying for God's assistance in their efforts. If the servant was successful or not in finding a wife was in God's hands, they had done their best to prepare.

The servant came to a well, where he prayed that God would show him the woman who was to be Isaac's wife. At this point, alarm bells should be going off in your head, because for whatever reason, wells are the place of romance in the Old Testament. Jacob and Rachel and Moses and Zipporah will also meet at wells. No sooner had the servant finished praying then here came a woman, who not only agreed to give him water but also watered his camels, the sign he had prayed God would give him to indicate the woman for Isaac. He asked who she was, and, lo and behold, she was the granddaughter of Abraham's brother Nahor! A woman from Abraham's own family, just as he had prayed. And, the text tells us, she was both attractive and single. And, when they went back to her brother's home, Rebekah's brother and mother both agreed the match was God's plan and Rebekah should go with him. As, when asked, did Rebekah.

That right there is a detail worth pausing over. Rebekah's opinion in the matter, if she too thought this match was from God and if she was willing to go, her agreement that it was and she would. Culturally, there was no need or expectation for that question. But Rebekah and her family, the story makes clear, saw God's hand in this unfolding, saw God calling Rebekah

just as God had called Abraham, to leave behind everything she'd ever known, her country, her home, her family, to head out to a new place with a distant promise that God would make of her a great people and through her all people of the earth would be blessed. The God who first called Abraham now, through Abraham's servant, called Rebekah, and Rebekah answered that call. This is a story about the bravery of the women of Abraham's lineage, how both men and women are called to leave behind their past and head to an uncertain future. How might this story, how might our faith, be different if Rebekah had said, no?

And that would have been enough to complete God's role in the story. A wife returning with the servant for Isaac, from Abraham's own kin just as Abraham had requested, so that Isaac could have descendants and continue the covenant God had made with Abraham. But that is not where it ends. The text goes on, as they approached the Negeb, where Isaac was now living, Rebekah saw Isaac walking in the field to meet them. "Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent... and she became his wife; and he loved her." He loved her. In our modern romantic context this seems an insignificant detail but remember this is a contractual agreement between these two families for the purpose of making descendants. Ancient Near East marriages, especially arranged marriages such as this one, had little or nothing to do with love. But love is what came.

And think about this. Think about all the trauma and grief and pain Isaac went through in his life, the casting out of his half-brother by his father, at his mother's command. Almost being sacrificed by his father as a show of faithfulness. The loss of his mother, and the grief

that brought. Isaac had every reason to be a bitter, angry, selfish individual, and yet, somehow, Isaac grew up to be the kind of man who loved his wife. Who, we'll read some more stories about this man and his family in the next few weeks, certainly wasn't perfect. But who loved his wife, who trusted God's place in their relationship, and who was comforted by that relationship, which allowed him to move through his grief. In many ways, ways that we'll see even more clearly next week, this is a story about how Isaac was not his parents. About how the family he came from did not define him, and he was able to create a different sort of community than the one he'd experienced.

Dear people of God, this is a love story. This is a story about how the covenant God made with God's people is bigger than religious practices and divine promises, ours is a God who cares too about the nature and quality of our relationships. Isaac brought her into his mother's tent, signifying her status in the family, and he was comforted after his mother's death. This detail tells us again that Rebekah and Isaac's marriage was about more than property and future posterity, it was about comfort and support. About caring for each other in hard times and good and supporting one another in joy and in grief.

This story and its place in Abraham's family tells us something important about the nature of God. Who God is, how God works, and how God wants for us to work. This story reminds us that every human relationship is not, should not be, transactional. It shows us that God loves love. God loves us, God loves that we love each other, God wants for us to love each other. To support and care for each other. The God who created the cosmos, who set the stars in their places, and who is in the middle of a many thousand-year long project of

blessing all of creation through this family, cares enough to want them to also actually like each other. So much does God love all of humanity, that God cares about our individual relationships. No detail of our life is beyond God's care. Amen.