

*Genesis 24:34-38, 42-47, 58-67*  
*Song of Solomon 2:8-13 Matthew 11:25-30*

*word count:1,598*

Today's story is not one that gets lifted up often. On the surface, it is simply a tale of how Isaac and Rebekah found each other. It is the "shift" between the stories of Abraham and Sarah and the family of Isaac and Rebekah. This summer, the First Testament stories are about the marriages and families of this new nation that would come from Abraham and Sarah. And since we are entering into a season of talking about traditional family values and marriage, I thought I would simply let the lectionary speak for itself and tell us more about how those values apply or perhaps do not apply to 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans who express a desire to emulate their biblical ancestors on all matters familial.

Two weeks ago, we heard the story where Abraham coerced his wife's slave into having a child, and when he was finally able to have a son with Sarah, at her request, he drove the slave, Hagar, into the desert with his son Ishmael, to die there in the hot sun. In the Islamic version, he provides Hagar with a place to live, and is the father of two families. Last week, we heard how he took his remaining son Isaac, now referred to as his "only" son (though Ishmael is very much alive) up to a place where he believed that he was to bind and sacrifice Isaac, until an angel appeared to stop him.

This week's story provides us with hope and a good example on the topic of marriage and family. Initially, this does not appear to be so. In the background of this engaging story stands the central theological theme of the patriarchal stories—the promise of land, progeny, and blessing to all of the world—and the constant threat to its fulfillment.

It is a story of how a people felt called to come to a new place and colonize it as their own. Although there were already inhabitants who lived on the land, these people were marginalized because they did not share the same faith or lineage and were thus inferior.

And so the unnamed servant in this passage tells us the story of how Isaac met Rebekah. After the death of Sarah, Abraham wanted a wife for Isaac who was not a local Canaanite, but a member of his own family. He sent his servant, probably his chief steward in whom he had great trust, to visit his kinfolk and bring back a bride.

The servant prayed to God that he would know the right woman when he met her by a test whereby she would offer him water for himself and for his camels. When he met Rebekah, she did exactly that. He knew he had found the right bride, so he responded to her ministrations by clamping a ring on her nose and putting bracelets on her arms. Admittedly, the bracelets part sounds good, but are there any women here who met their future husband after their father sent his servant to your house to snap a ring in your nose and lead you away? If so, I should genuinely like to meet you.

The servant told her father, Laban, about the test, and it became clear to Laban that Rebekah was destined by God to marry Isaac. However, it is important to note that Rebekah was *asked*—she was in fact questioned about her consent to go off on the spur of the moment to meet and marry her future husband. And Rebekah said, "Yes."

There is a lot to this story that is not what we would call, "admirable" today—ethnocentrism, sexism, the arbitrary exercise of patriarchal authority, and the epitome of an arranged marriage. And yet there is something that stands out above all else. Rebekah believed that God had played a hand in leading her to the one person she would cherish above all others, and so Rebekah was willing to set out knowing she would find the love of her life, no matter how the

traditions and mores of her time seemed against her finding happiness in a mutual, loving partnership.

Rebekah consents without coercion to leave her family and sets out on an adventure. She brings both her nurse and her maids. As soon as she sees Isaac, she “slips from the camel ... took her veil and covered herself.” This covering may reflect conventions in which the public exposure of a woman’s shape is suspect, but given that she apparently rode her camel without the veil, Rebekah may also be feeling the stirring of attraction at the sight of a new love. It is made clear that Isaac “loved her.” (verse 67) This is important, because upon meeting Rebekah, Isaac brought her alone into his tent, where it says, “He took” her. This is not the way people are at least, *encouraged* to enter into marriage today—the wedding is supposed to happen first. Yet clearly in these days the concept of the beginnings of a matrimonial relationship both began and were recognized differently.

While few today would agree that this is the best way to find a spouse and begin a marriage, in the end, it seems, Isaac and Rebekah established a relationship built on love and consent.

Today’s reading is matched with one from the Song of Solomon, a book of somewhat scandalous nature. In it, a young woman calls out to her lover. The lectionary skips some of the racy parts (because it *is* meant to be read in church, where for one hour a week, we are expected not to exist from the waist down) and picks up with, “The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved speaks and says to me: ‘Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.’”

Passion. Mutuality. Commitment. Duty. These elements are present in how people express their love. For Rebekah and Isaac, these essentials are all evident in their married life, building upon, and even in spite of the conventions of their day. Despite the outside forces present in family expectations, cultural mores and long-standing traditions, their union was holy to them because they chose to believe that love would be present and that was all that mattered.

This is not marriage as *we* know it. This is not how we *come* to know it. But what sanctifies this marriage is the fact that these two people love each other, and felt that God had led them towards one another.

In establishing love as a primary goal despite the obstacles and in becoming the next generation of a new land that would become a great nation, Isaac and Rebekah gave a great gift. Passion. Mutuality. Commitment. Duty. It was the promise of a new future that redeemed the past while honoring their inheritance from Abraham and building upon their country in order to pass it on again with full respect and love of that country for what it could be next. What they passed on was a new generation that understood who they were and what they stood for—people who placed love over convention, mutual desire above the way things had always been done, and the knowledge that God was present in their love and with their families and community. It was an act that at the time was as fully patriotic and faithful as it should be viewed today. They entered into the celebration of life with open hearts and a desire to live life fully by committing themselves to each other and to what they understood as being the desire of God.

In the Gospel of Matthew, (11) Jesus says that Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds. He adds, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” This was good news to those for whom the government’s laws presented a heavy oppression. Jesus’ promise of rest and a light burden is heard and appropriated by all whose lives are pressed down, for whatever reason.

Punishment comes not because of anything we do or are, but because we don't join in the celebration of life like Isaac and Rebekah by owning up to who we are and bringing the gifts inherent in us *because* of who we are into service.

The Teacher is in the camp! Wisdom is vindicated! The Spirit moves among us! Open your eyes. Open your hearts. The New Age is now, and the Promised Land is exactly where you are. Turn, grasp, embrace, serve — live differently — and Jesus of Nazareth will meet you at the banquet table, on the dance floor, at the peace vigil, at the Crop Walk and AIDS Walk, in the board room, in the halls of Congress — anywhere that justice is being done, bonds are being loosed, strangers are being embraced, the hungry are being fed, and love is always being lifted up above the conventions of the day. Begin your walk here at this table where whoever you are and wherever you are on your faith journey, you are welcome here. AMEN.

***Sermon Resources:***

“Out in Scripture” online resource, Human Rights Campaign, sponsor

“Preaching Through the Christian Year A,” Fred Craddock et al, editors

**Scripture for Sunday, July 6, 2008 Proper 9A**

**Genesis 24:34-38, 42-47, 58-67**

The servant said to Laban, "I am Abraham's servant. The LORD has greatly blessed my master, and he has become wealthy; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys. And Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master when she was old; and he has given him all that he has. My master made me swear, saying, 'You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I live; but you shall go to my father's house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son.'

"I came today to the spring, and said, 'O LORD, the God of my master Abraham, if now you will only make successful the way I am going! I am standing here by the spring of water; let the young woman who comes out to draw, to whom I shall say, "Please give me a little water from your jar to drink," and who will say to me, "Drink, and I will draw for your camels also" — let her be the woman whom the LORD has appointed for my master's son.'

"Before I had finished speaking in my heart, there was Rebekah coming out with her water jar on her shoulder; and she went down to the spring, and drew. I said to her, 'Please let me drink.' She quickly let down her jar from her shoulder, and said, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels.' So I drank, and she also watered the camels. Then I asked her, 'Whose daughter are you?' She said, 'The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor's son, whom Milcah bore to him.' So I put the ring on her nose, and the bracelets on her arms."

And they called Rebekah, and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" She said, "I will." So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his men. And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, "May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes." Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man; thus the servant took Rebekah, and went his way. Now Isaac had come from Beer-lahai-roi, and was settled in the Negeb. Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field; and looking up, he saw camels coming. And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, and said to the servant, "Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us?" The servant said, "It is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.