

Here's Your Sign – July 9, 2017 – Genesis 24

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A flight attendant spent a week's vacation in the Rockies. She was captivated by the mountain peaks, the clear blue skies, and the sweet-smelling pines. But she also was charmed by a very eligible bachelor who owned and operated a cattle ranch and lived in a log cabin. At the end of this week, Mr. Wonderful proposed. But it had all happened so quickly that the woman decided to return home and to her job, feeling that she would somehow be guided to make the right decision. The next day, during her flight, she found herself wondering what to do. To perk up, she stopped in the rest room and splashed some cool water on her face. There was some turbulence and a sign in the rest room lit up: PLEASE RETURN TO THE CABIN. She did--to the cabin back in the Rocky Mountains (Reader's Digest [1/81], p. 118)

Many people like these types of romantic stories, somehow they give us hope that in the end everything will be all right. Hollywood makes a fortune each year off this fascination of ours for sappy love stories. Romantic comedies always seem to draw a big crowd to the box office. We sit in our theater seats munching popcorn watching rejection and misadventure, until finally the characters find one another and realize they were meant to be together all along. Even though it doesn't always work out that way in real life, we like to see the star-crossed lovers come together in the end and ride off into the sunset, happily ever after.

For these past several weeks we have been tagging along with Abraham and Sarah and their sojourn as resident aliens in the land of Canaan. In today's story, we find the transition into the next generation beginning with the story of how Abraham went about securing a wife for his beloved son Isaac.

Even though God has not specifically told Abraham to avoid marrying his son to one of the local girls, Abraham realizes that his best bet is to hook Isaac up with one of the relatives from back home. But perhaps Abraham realizes that due to the special promise given to his particular family, for now, it's probably best to keep it all in the family. God's promise to Abraham that he would bring God's blessing to all families on earth would take quite a while to come about, ultimately finding its fruition in Jesus Christ. But for now, Abraham sends his oldest servant, loaded down with camels and various gifts, back to the hometown to find Isaac's bride.

Isaac is 40 years old by this point. He's still younger than his parents when they started having kids, but still.... Now Abraham trusts that God will provide, but he also acts. He realizes that a suitable wife for his son probably just won't show up at the tent flap some morning, asking to come in and make the coffee. If he expects to find a wife for Isaac from his own kin, then he needs to go where they are.

So Abraham sent off his most trusted servant with a sizeable dowry to the old homestead. The servant respects Abraham and worships Abraham's God. He knows the importance of his, and he wants to succeed. When he arrived in the city of Nahor, he made himself comfortable near the town well. He knew that the women of the town would come there to draw water. He prayed to God, asking for success and asking that God would show him a sign so that he would know which girl was the right one. The girl who gave him a drink and offered to draw water for his camels would be her. Before he even had a chance to finish praying, Rebekah, the daughter of Abraham's nephew, came to the well.

She immediately gave him a drink, and then she offered to care for his camels until they were satisfied. Now I suspect that 10 thirsty camels can drink a lot of water. Rebecca went out of her way to be of service, showing to the servant of Abraham that she had a great deal of character. Now the girl did exactly what the servant had prayed to God about. He received his sign. But the next verse is really profound, verse 21, which wasn't part of our reading this morning, but is important nonetheless. The verse reads, "The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether or not the Lord had made his journey successful."

He had asked for a sign, and received a sign. But he didn't stop there. He didn't rush into anything. He took a moment of silent reflection, to pause, to really examine the situation. And in the time of silence, of meditation, he was able to see that the sign of God was indeed valid. Now for us, we don't generally go around expecting these kinds of signs. So how do we know what God wants for us?

We believe that the Bible is God's revelation to humanity, and God speaks to us through its words. Additionally we have the gift of God's Holy Spirit to guide and instruct us. God speaks to us in many ways - through the teachings of the church, through the lessons of the Bible, through the leading of the Holy Spirit, and through the council of wise Christian friends and mentors.

This is one reason why it is important for us to make sure that we don't just relegate God to one hour on a Sunday morning. If we desire to know God and to follow God's leading in our lives, then we have to devote some effort in learning about God and understanding God's ways. If we try to get to know someone in our personal lives, we'll never get anywhere with just one hour a week. Knowing God takes time and it takes effort.

So how do we get to know God better? By reading the Bible, spending time in prayer or meditation, joining a Bible study group, keeping a journal, or developing a relationship with someone who can act as a spiritual mentor. It is only when we seek to know God in a deeper way that we will be able to discern those things God wants us to know. It is then that we can be like Abraham's servant and know when the answer is looking us in the face, like Rebekah holding her water jug.

And it was then that Abraham's servant knew that Rebekah was the woman for Isaac. He explained to her his mission and then went to be with her family. Rebekah's family was indeed kin to Abraham, and they were amiable to the request for marriage. And somewhat surprisingly, they allowed Rebecca to make the choice of whether to go or not. And she did.

This story is different than some of the others we have seen recently. The role of God is different. Rather than being a direct actor in the events of the story, God's role is behind the scenes. We see instead that God is quietly present in the daily affairs of life, and when we look for it, we may glimpse the hand of God at work. Sometimes we see only in retrospect, but I think there is a sense of comfort for us when we consider that God does care about the ordinary things of life.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann sees this story as one that pushes us to think carefully about faith. He writes, "In a culture which grasps for visible signs of faith, which is driven toward scientism, and which falls for too many religious quackeries, this story stands as a foil against easy and mistaken faith. The workings of God are not spectacular, not magical, not oddities. Disclosure of God comes by steady discernment and by readiness to trust the resilience that is present in the course of daily affairs." (Genesis, p. 201)

Unlike the fireworks displays that many of us watched earlier this holiday week, God's actions in our lives are often subtle and ordinary. Occasionally we may witness something miraculous, but for the most part, God's providential activity is simply a part of our regular daily lives. As we take the time to learn and study and understand better who God is, we will be able, like Abraham's servant, to see the incredible workings of God in the simple aspects of daily living. And perhaps we can begin to live our lives trusting that God is at work around us, even when we can't see it directly.