

GENTLE NUDGES

Scripture Readings: Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45:10-17; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Texts: Psalm 45:17; Genesis 24:48

During Ordinary Time (i.e., when you see the green paraments), the Lectionary Committee decided to use what is called semi-continuous readings for the Hebrew Bible, the Epistles, and the Gospels. This kind of reading means that the committee did not try to find Hebrew Bible texts and Epistle texts to serve as proof texts for the Gospel reading. The integrity and narrative for each reading is maintained; the challenge, of course, is trying to find a thread between the texts. That missing thread is one reason why I haven't been reading from the Hebrew Bible for the last couple of weeks.

During Year A (which we are in), the Hebrew Bible's semi-continuous readings follow the stories of the Patriarchs through the Judges (a span of about 8 centuries in historical terms.) The last few weeks have followed parts of the Abraham and Sarah story, and now we move into the Isaac story.

I think of Isaac as the forgotten patriarch wedged between Abraham and Jacob. Unlike Abraham or even Jacob, Isaac never has a direct conversation with God, and God only speaks directly to Isaac one time. Actually Isaac has little to say through his story; the most extensive dialogue comes toward the end of his life when Jacob and Rebekah trick him out of the blessing intended for Esau (more on that a few weeks from now.)

Today's reading is a transition story as the narrative begins to move away from Abraham to Isaac. Some of the background we need is that last week's reading was Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac. We should not be surprised, then, to learn that after the attempt neither Isaac nor Sarah say another word to Abraham in the narrative. Talmudic rabbis speculate that the attempt to sacrifice Isaac also led to Sarah's death at the age of 127. Isaac was 37 at the time of Sarah's death and, as we discover later, apparently heartbroken over her death.

Almost three years later, Abraham decides that it is time for Isaac to marry—at nearly 40, you'd think so. Chapter 24 in Genesis is the story of getting Isaac married; Walter Brueggemann¹ divides the story into four scenes. Today's readings contain parts of

the last two scenes so we miss of the important action before we get to the second half of the story.

Scene 1 is when Abraham picks his oldest and most trusted servant (he is in charge of the other servants) even though he remains nameless throughout the narrative. Abraham doesn't want Isaac to marry a Canaanite woman so he wants his servant to go back to Mesopotamia, find the kinfolk, and choose a woman out of that lot. The servant worries that no woman will want to follow him back from the cosmopolitan Fertile Crescent to backwater Canaan. Even though Abraham assures the servant that God will lead him, he promises the servant that if he can't find a woman to come back with him, he will be released from his oath. The servant takes the oath, not a Bible but on Abraham's thigh. Side note: the words said by Abraham in this conversation are the last he utters in the Hebrew Bible.

The second scene begins with the servant taking ten camels and lots of goodies for the bachelor gig. He journeys 400 miles to the city of Nahor (not the one in Virginia, most likely another name for Haran in upper Mesopotamia) and he stops at the well outside of town where he figures he might get some action—apparently wells are the place to find unattached women as Jacob will discover later on. The servant offers a little prayer to YHWH (Abraham's God) asking to be guided to the right woman for Isaac; he indicates that he trusts God will do this because of God's *hesed*—steadfast love.

Just as he finishes his prayer, he spies Rebekah coming to collect water. Rebekah is pretty and the English translation tells us she is a virgin (like, how did he know?); actually, the Hebrew word there simply means a woman of marriageable age and there are no indications that she is already married. So the servant asks Rebekah if he can have some of the water she has collected. She obliges and then notices his ten camels, so she offers to water them also. This offer is pretty extraordinary; camels can drink 20-30 gallons at one sitting and there are 10 of them. The servant quickly discovers that not only is Rebekah pretty, she's strong too!

The servant watches her in silence not lifting a finger to help. When she finishes watering the camels, he offers her a bride price of a nose ring and two very expensive bracelets and then he asks about her family. It turns out that Rebekah is Isaac's first cousin once removed! At that point, the servant praises God for God's steadfast love because he has found the one for Isaac.

Scene 3 begins with Rebekah running home to her mother's household. Rebekah's brother, Laban, notices the bling and asks Rebekah who gave it to her; so Laban goes to fetch Abraham's servant to offer him supper. The servant is too excited to eat, he

has to tell his story. Our reading picks up on his story which is a reprise of the first two scenes we have just heard about.

When the servant finishes his retelling of the story, both Laban and Bethuel (who has mysteriously appeared in the narrative—he, by the way, is Rebekah and Laban’s father, Abraham’s nephew) exclaim, “This thing comes from the LORD (YHWH.)” Walter Brueggemann finds this exclamation perplexing—how do Laban and Bethuel know about YHWH? When God called Abraham and Sarah, only they and Lot lived in Haran. The rest of the family was still in Ur. When exactly did Abraham tell his nephew and great nephew about God? Later on we will discover that Laban doesn’t necessarily claim God as his god because he still has his household gods. We may suspect a little tampering by the story teller. Anyway, they are impressed enough by the story—I imagine the gold nose ring and bracelets didn’t hurt—they immediately agree to sell Rebekah as Isaac’s wife.

With the deal made, scene 4 shifts to a request by the family to keep Rebekah for another ten days so a proper farewell can be made. Abraham’s servant insists that they depart immediately, so Laban and Milcah, Rebekah’s and Laban’s mother, ask Rebekah whether she wants to go immediately—Rebekah says, “Now!” which makes one wonder about how she really feels about her family.

Rebekah and the servant take the 400+ mile journey back to Isaac. When Rebekah sees Isaac for the first time, the English translation says she slipped quickly off the camel—actually, the Hebrew conveys the sense that she fell off—could we say she literally fell in love? So she veils herself, meets Isaac, and the servant retells his story again (fortunately, the story teller doesn’t make us go through it again.) Isaac installs Rebekah in his mother’s tent and he marries her, he loves her because she provides comfort in the midst of his grieving for his mother. A lot of interesting family dynamics going on in that final sentence but the good one is that Isaac loves Rebekah which means something special happened in this arranged marriage.

What I like about Isaac’s story is that he is really like most of us. We often find ourselves surrounded by extraordinary people and yet, we feel mostly ordinary. Unlike Abraham and Jacob, most of us don’t have direct conversations with God. Rather we have to observe and trust that God interacts in our lives with steadfast love. Like Isaac and the servant, we may not catch the activity of God until we look back the events of our lives, and then we are astounded at how God has remained steadfast in love.

We discover that God is present and active in even the most mundane events in life. As Brueggemann points out in his commentary, Isaac’s story here is so worldly. His

father wants to find the right woman for him, the servant looks in the expected place, utters a little prayer, and, sure enough, Rebekah shows up at the right time. Her family supports the marriage—it didn't hurt that generous gifts lubricated the process—and Rebekah embraces the prospect. Even Isaac wrapped in grief over his mother's death finds respite in his love for Rebekah.

Isn't that how most of us live our lives? We find our life journeys filled with wonderful coincidences and when we look back we realize that God had a hand in finding the right person, the right thing, the right time, or the right place. God does not always move with blinding flashes or big events, rather we find God moving us in the right direction with gentle nudges. The question is: do we pay attention to those nudges? Do we trust God's steadfast love for us?

©2017 Kevin B. Buchanan

ⁱ All references to Walter Brueggemann come from his commentary Genesis, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982.