

“Water for Camels” Geneses 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

Family Stories. We all have them. They are the stories about Great Grandmother Donnell who kept a hoe by the back door of the ranch house in West Texas so she could kill the rattle snakes she found sunning in her garden...and about Grandpa Herb who fought in and survived the Battle of the Bulge even when his commander and bunkmate did not. They are the stories about Aunt Nancy's legendary scar from when your Dad "accidentally" dropped a hammer on her head and Uncle Don's tales of leading illegal Christian worship services in the basement of people's homes while serving as a missionary in then very restricted Taiwan. They are the stories of 50th wedding anniversaries, tales of tragic and sudden loss of dear family members, and celebrations of the births of new members of the family. They are the stories of our families...the stories we hear at reunions, we remember at funerals, and if we are lucky, have written down in some form so that our children and our children's children will know them.

Today's Scripture...and actually most of the Scripture we will be hearing this summer...is a story from our larger family of faith. The story about how great, great, great, great grandfather Isaac met great, great, great, great grandmother Rebekah. It is told this morning through the voice of the servant who is speaking to Rebekah's brother, Laben...listen

- 34 So he said, "I am Abraham's servant,
35 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.
36 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.
37 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;
38 But you shall go to my father's house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son."
- 42 "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!
43 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,"
44 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.'
45 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.'
46 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.
47 Then I asked her, 'Whose daughter are you?' She said, 'The daughter of Bethuel, Hanor's son, whom Milcah bore to him.' So I put the ring on her nose, and the bracelets on her arms.
48 Then I bowed my head and worshiped the Lord, and blessed the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me by the right way to obtain the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son.
49 Now then, if you (Laben and Bethuel – brother and father of Rebekah) will deal loyally and truly with my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so that I may turn either to the right hand or to the left."

- 58 And they called Rebekah, and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" She said, "I will."
59 So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his men.
60 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."
61 Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man; thus the servant took Rebekah, and went his way.
62 Now Isaac had come from Beerlahairoi, and was settled in the Negeb.
63 Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field; and looking up, he saw camels coming.
64 And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel,
65 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.
66 And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done.
67 Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her.

In the chapters that precede our story, God has called Abraham and his wife Sarah to leave their homeland and journey 400 miles away to a new land that God provided for them. God has called Abraham out to look at the dark, star-filled sky and promised him that his descendents – those born of Sarah and Abraham – those descendents will outnumber the stars in that sky. And God has kept God's promise...After year of barrenness...a longtime past childbearing years...God provided a son for Sarah and Abraham – a son named Isaac. God has held an active role speaking directly to Abraham and Sarah, providing land, wealth, and a son. God has been present with them and taken an active and visible role that Abraham, Sarah and their entire household have witnessed. God has made known that God is faithful and will fulfill God's promise. God has taken an active role in making sure God's promise of numerous descendents is fulfilled. As we approach this story of Isaac and Rebekah, it is reasonable to assume that God will remain at the core of this story.

But in today's story, God does not make an appearance. God does not even speak. Unlike the other family stories, God is not a visible actor. But make no mistake...God is certainly involved.

Twice, the servant uses the Hebrew word (nahah) which translates "to lead" or "to guide" as in "I bowed my head and worshipped the Lord, and blessed the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me by the right way to obtain the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son." This verb is only used in one other place in Scripture – and that is in Psalm 23 "He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."ⁱ Using this word helps the reader see that God's guiding presence flows throughout this passage and we can see evidence of that leading through the reflection of faith lived out by the actors who are in this story.

We see God's guiding presence reflected in Abraham's faithful response. He knows to have grandchildren and continue the line Isaac is going to need a wife and as head of the household, he would have been the one responsible in securing that bride. Abraham also knows this daughter in law must be willing to move to Canaan – to the land God has given them. So he calls forth his most trusted servant and charges him to fulfill a very important task.

We can see God's guiding presence reflected in the servant's faithful response. He has seen the blessings God has given to Abraham through land, wealth, and certainly Isaac. The servant prays to God to ask for guidance and clarity that he will be successful in finding the best wife for Isaac, he gives thanks and worships God when God delivers Rebekah, and he testifies to Rebekah's family about God's role in his success.ⁱⁱ And of course, in the fact that he returns to his master with a willing Rebekah.

We can see God's guiding presence reflected through Rebekah's faithful response. We see her fulfill all the social graces of her time by sharing her water with the servant...then offers, offers mind you to water his camels. It is worth noting the significance of this offer of hospitality. A camel is known for its ability to go for quite some time without drinking. When they do refill, they do so at an average of 20 gallons of water per camel.ⁱⁱⁱ And these camels – these 10 camels - have just traveled over 400 miles. This offer of hospitality by Rebekah would no doubt have meant numerous trips to the spring and back. (200 gallons of water – and no hose – yes, certainly a faithful response). And we see God's guiding Rebekah in her choosing to go immediately with the servant rather than adhering to the customary waiting period.

And finally, we can see God's guiding presence reflected through Isaac, who “happens” to be out walking when Rebekah approaches; in the welcoming of Rebekah into his Mother's tent signaling an “installation” if you will of the new matriarch. And God's presence is certainly in the manner which Isaac loved Rebekah. Not just in the customary sense of one fulfilling a marriage contract but that he truly loved her immediately.

All four of these persons – Abraham, the servant, Rebekah, and Isaac – all four of them are faithful followers. And while God is not speaking directly to them, it is clear that God is present guiding and leading them. They know who God is, have witnessed or heard witness of God's promise to and through Abraham's family, and they live their lives as a response to that promise.

Ministry matters, a clergy journal, describes this passage as “a story about a father, a servant, a woman, and a son all trying to seek the will of God in the everyday routine of their lives. The culmination is a narrative that emerges with a significant result...the continuation of God's promise. It is a story of how God works out divine promises through the interrelationship of many people; a story about many characters whose ordinary faithful following and collective participation brings about an extraordinary act (a heroic act)...namely the carrying on of God's promise to a new generation.”^{iv}

We have the benefit of 3000+ years of hindsight and we know “the rest of the story”. We know that Abraham's descendents do become as numerous as the stars and we know the Israelites become a community God calls to be God's people. And we know God works through the relationships of other faithful people in Scripture to fulfill divine promises. God leads people like Esther and Mordecai to save the Jewish people from slaughter; God leads people like Ruth and Naomi and Boaz to save the genealogical line to Jesus. And God leads the faithful responses of the disciples who carry on preaching and teaching after the risen Christ has returned to the Father. All cases of faithful followers whose collective participation leads toward the fulfillment of God's kingdom.

And if we in the church know anything, it is that God's guidance continues through the relationships of people today:

People like 11 year old faithful follower Tyler Page who learned about child trafficking in Ghana in church one Sunday. Hoping to raise the \$240 to help keep one child out of harms way, he started lemonade stands and held carwashes. Soon his friends and relatives jumped on board and held even more carwashes and sold even more lemonade. Within 17 months, Tyler and his friends have raised over \$50,000 all from – believe it or not – selling lemonade and washing cars...their efforts helping keep over 200 Ghanain children successfully out of the child trafficking industry. ^v

If we in the church know anything, it is that God's guidance continues through the relationships of people today:

People like Scott and Roberta and the 21 other youth from the church I used to serve in NC. The group traveled to San Antonio on a youth mission trip to work with the children's program at the House of Neighborly Service expecting to be the ones to faithfully show and share God's love...only to discover that while helping provide VBS for these children, we in turn were witnesses to God's profound love that came through the laughter, the hugs, the faithful following of Alicia, Ramone and the 65 other children who attended the program.

If we in the church know anything, it is that God's guidance continues through the relationships of people today:

People like members of this congregation and other local congregations who raised and provided funds to begin Safe Harbor 2 – a shelter for women and children who are victims of domestic violence. People like the men and women who spent hours building, painting, and furnishing the rooms, and the people who volunteer time to help cook, clean, and cloth, the brave women and children who show up at their doorstep at all hours of the day and night.

If we in the church know anything, it is that God's guidance continues through the relationships of people today:

- People like the 19 college students who went to Nashville on Spring Break; the 19 MS youth and their advisors who traveled to Virginia earlier this summer and the 29 SH youth and their advisors who just returned from New Orleans...all who worked together to share and experience the love of God.
- People like you who gather to build Habitat houses
- People like you who provided donations and time to purchase, pack and deliver Christmas baskets to 185 households.
- People like you who support medical mission teams, water missions funding and trips, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance relief funds, Disaster relief trips, Funds for missionaries, , etcetera, etcetera, exc. ^{vi}

Yes, if we in the church know anything, it is that God's guidance continues through the relationships of people today.

The good news is God has helped us establish the church – the community that works together to discern where God is leading...and works together to follow faithfully. The bad news is that there is still much work to be done...so until then, we keep on...faithfully following where God is leading...and celebrating that we don't do it alone...but that together with our brothers

and sisters in this place, in this denomination and all over this world, God is leading us toward the kingdom....together.

All glory be to God the father, God the son and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Mary Cunningham Gause
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ⁱ Brueggemann, Walter, Interpretation: Genesis. John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1982. pg. 200.

ⁱⁱ New Interpreter's Bible Commentary. Genesis. Abingdon Press, Nashville, pg 511.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.loc.gov/rr/scitech/mysteries/camel.html>

^{iv} www.ministrymatters.com

^v <http://oprahangelnetwork.org/stories/727-kids-helping-kids>

^{vi} Fort Hill Presbyterian Church 2010 Annual Report