

Providence United Methodist Church
"A Call to Be"
Genesis 24:34-48; Matthew 11:28-30
Dr. Bill Jeffries
July 3, 2011

As we come to this July Fourth weekend, our lectionary readings lead us to review the stories of Genesis. Last week we looked at the Isaac and Abraham experiences when their faith was tested. This week we see Abraham and Isaac when a partner is sought for Isaac and Rebekah enters the picture. Although the story of Isaac and Rebekah's marriage is not like the royal wedding of Prince William and Kate, there are some similarities. I invite you to hear the story of Isaac and Rebekah as a story of faith in a covenant perspective. Hear the story in terms of how it relates to the forming of our nation on the Fourth of July weekend. Ask yourself where God is in this story from Genesis. Does this story relate to your relationship with God and our walk of faith as a church with God?

Let's begin with a context statement. Abraham and Sarah were husband and wife. He was 100 years old and she was ninety when a son, Isaac, was born to them, a fulfillment of a twenty-five year old promise from God that they would have descendants too numerous to count.

A description of the barren years in the lives of Sarah, Rebekah, and other women named in Genesis creates a tension in readers who inevitably wonder how God will fulfill his promise. We, too, might wonder how God will answer our spiritual questions.

Let us move fast forward to find Isaac at forty years old. Sarah has died. Abraham faces the end of his life. For the family to continue, Isaac, an only child, needs to marry. But whom shall he marry? Abraham lived in the land of Canaan, the promised land, but he does not want Isaac to marry a woman from Canaanite tribes for they do not have the same faith in his God nor have the love of his God. Thus Abraham sent his servant, Eliezer, to travel to the land of Abraham's descendants to find a wife for Isaac. The servant was dispatched with instructions that if the woman selected will not return with him, the servant will be released from his oath to Abraham. This creates a dual point of tension in the story: where will Eliezer find the right woman, one connected to the lineage of Abraham, and further, will this woman agree to return with him? No way is visible at this point to indicate how his mission and God's promise will be fulfilled.

Eliezer arrived at the city of Nahor, Abraham's brother, in the evening. He had with him helpers and ten camels. The camels knelt near the well of water at this time of day when women come to the well to draw their water supply. As Eliezer waited, he prayed to God that the right woman would appear and he would know her by her generosity.

Rebekah appeared with her water jug on her shoulder. While she filled her jug, a servant approached her and asked for a drink of water. She quickly lowered the jug to give him water and volunteered to water his camels after he finished drinking. The servant then asked Rebekah what family she came from. She responded that she was the daughter of Bethuel, son of Milcah and Nahor. Yes, she was from the right lineage.

The next step was for Eliezer to talk with the family of Rebekah to ask for consent that she become Isaac's wife. Her brother, Laban, is head of the family. After he heard the servant's story, he consented to the union. Yes, lots of celebration followed. When Eliezer asked that he and she depart the next day, the family requested that they stay the traditional ten days to celebrate her impending marriage within the village, as well as within the family. Laban suggested they ask Rebekah for her opinion on the departure time. She consented to leave the following day, so at that time gifts were exchanged and she departed for her new home.

Upon arrival, Rebekah saw a man at a distance and put on her veil. Eliezer went to Isaac to inform him of his trip. Isaac went to meet Rebekah, led her to Sarah's tent, and according to

scripture, "He married Rebekah and she became his wife and he loved her." You will recall the rest of the story -- Isaac and Rebekah had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Jacob was the younger but ended up with the father's blessing through trickery. Jacob later reconciled with Esau and was blessed with twelve sons who were to form the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob also was the father of Joseph, who saved the family from starvation at one point as we read in the story of Moses and the Exodus.

Thus the marriage of Isaac to Rebekah fulfilled in many ways the promise that God had made to Abraham many years before, one which formed a covenant between them as Abraham responded to God's call to be in a relationship with Him and would be blessed. The meaning of that promise was not clear at the time, but its meaning unfolded as God worked in the lives of those involved.

As we listen to and follow this journey of Isaac and Rebekah, we are reminded of the fragile nature of the walk of faith, one that was common to our forbearers as well as for us as we walk our own journeys of faith. It is not clear or visible how the promises of God will be fulfilled. Abraham and Isaac had to trust God, as did Rebekah. Each was asked to move forward at points in faith during certain circumstances. Had the servant not been faithful to his oath to Abraham, had Rebekah not agreed to go, or had Laban not trusted God, the outcome of the story would have been different. Laban said at one point, "Rebekah is before you, take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son, as the Lord has spoken." "As the Lord has spoken" was the authority upon which they acted in this moment, beginning when the servant trusted that God would give him a sign through the generosity of an unknown woman at the well. Had these events not been surrounded in faith and with trust in God, things would have been different.

We are reminded, as we sit here today and review our own lives, where these moments have been in our own journeys. When did we act in faith at a crucial time? Why did we do it? When have we prayed about a decision and then seen things begin to happen and indicate a path opening for us? The future is often, if not always, covered in much that is unclear and uncertain. We look for signs Eliezer found upon finding Rebekah, as Abraham found when he saw a ram in a burning bush when he was about to sacrifice Isaac, or as we act in faith based on facts that begin to tell us we should trust the process.

It is good for us to remember these moments in our lives because, in reality, we face them along our journeys in life more often than we are willing to admit. The one thing of which we can be certain is that if we do not face such moments while trusting Christ and seeking His guidance, we will often end up on places that we did not intend to find or in relationships that are not healthy. How do we know?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, on page thirty-seven in his book Life Together, while writing about the tension in building community says, "The life or death of a Christian community is determined by whether it achieves sober wisdom about whether a path is a human ideal or God's reality . . . life together under the Word will remain sound and healthy only where it does not form itself into a movement but rather where it understands itself as being part of the one, holy, catholic, Christian church, where it shares actively and passively in the suffering and struggles and promises of the whole church ."

Thus our journey as a church of Jesus Christ often requires us to be in prayer and in the study of Scripture to listen for affirmation that we are part of God's path as we venture into the future. For the servant of Abraham, it was someone willing to share a drink of water with a stranger. As the writer of Hebrews notes in 13.1, "Do not neglect to share hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

Each time we reach a point of uncertainty in our journey of faith, being open to the leading of God's Spirit as set forth in Scripture seems to affirm who we are and the journey ahead. The good news is that if we make a wrong turn, even with a GPS, there is always a re-calculated path back if we are open to it. In John Wesley's wisdom we also have a proven process with the acronym STER (Scripture, Tradition, Experience, Reason) to lead us through such times. However it does not lessen the anxiety of the unknown at the time, we learn to discern signs that give us comfort during such moments.

So we see in the Isaac/Rebekah story a pattern of how God works with us in our journeys of faith. The call "to be" or an invitation to become involved in some situation that touches our hearts, when is followed by our response—either yes or no, and then the marriage that results from our assent to be in relationship with God and letting Him lead us through the ensuing adventure.

We can experience this kind of life, as suggested by Richard Foster, a noted theologian and leader in spiritual growth, in his book, Life With God. On page forty-nine, he suggests, "Here is the central mystery of life with God: the way into it is simply trusting in Jesus." Foster believes in developing a relationship with Jesus in order to know the way He thinks. We are to listen for the signs that a potential action would be something of His doing and then prayerfully enjoying the ride with Him.

One image that helps me is from John 10:11, where we read that the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Christ is with us and is always seeking ways to help us stay on the path that leads to abundant life. It comes down to whether we will allow ourselves to trust Christ to be our shepherd in this decision or if this will be another event in which we remain in control! This is the same question John Arey raised for us in the Abraham/Isaac experience last Sunday.

The mix between our will and God's invitation are scenes from the Garden of Eden in Genesis again and again. But we need to remember that as in the Isaac/Rebekah story, God is constantly searching for ways to help us discover the promises given and the path that has been laid out for us -- an invitation to move into God's love story for us.

Finally, we return to the Gospel reading for today in Matthew, the words of Jesus remind us, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest." This is the Shepherd's promise as he calls to you and to me. We know His give and He knows who we are. His love for us is unconditional and never ending! No matter how far we have strayed or how distant we may feel from Christ, He, like the Prodigal Father, is waiting for a sign from us or a turning to indicate that we want to come home.

As we stand in the threshold of change of Pastoral leadership here at Providence United Methodist Church, and the addition of a minister of Evangelism and Discipleship, let us take time to pray for our new pastors and for our church. Let us pray that we will be attentive to God's Word and Spirit, and will let God continue to work in and through us to be "a growing body of Christ glorifying God and serving others" as that continues to unfold in the context of what lies ahead.

Likewise, I invite us to remember our heritage and history as a country today and tomorrow, especially. Let us remember the good and the bad moments, the times when we have felt very connected as a people and the times when we have felt estranged from each other. Let us give thanks for the freedom that we enjoy and the opportunity to pursue well-being (happiness). Let us ask for forgiveness for times we have abused and/or neglected that freedom. Let us pray that we, as a people, as a nation, will turn our hearts and minds to be reflections of the love of Christ in the world and to each other. Let us remember that it works best when Church and State hold each accountable and critique each other.

There is a line in 2 Chronicles to the effect that if we will repent and ask God for forgiveness, God will have mercy and heal our land.

Hear Paul's words about freedom in Galatians 5:16-15 (Peterson). "My counsel is this: live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit. Then you won't feel the compulsion of selfishness. For there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free Spirit, just as the free Spirit is incompatible with selfishness."

Let us come to the Table of Our Lord, ready to be touched once again by his Love and Grace! Let us respond to His invitation to come to Him!

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.