

Proper 9: Year 4/5 July 2020 Morning Prayer

St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY

Patricia Kay Jue, lay preacher

A Love Story

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

Psalm 145:8-15

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Today, I want to tell you a love story, but a very different kind of story than what might come to your mind when you think about a love story. Today, we heard parts of the very long story of the courtship of Rebekah and Isaac. Mostly, we learn about Rebekah. And in one of the verses omitted in today's reading, Rebekah is described as very beautiful. Rebekah also must have been adventurous and brave to leave her family and homeland, prepared to live the rest of her life in a distant land. We met Rebekah at a well. She offers a drink of water to the visiting stranger, a nice cool cup of water. And after offering refreshment to the man, she waters the camels.

Camels can go for a long time without water because when they are able to drink, they drink a lot; twenty to thirty gallons of water at a time. So here is Rebekah offering to give water for ten camels. Ten times twenty gallons... Clearly this is a very strong woman with lots of stamina! But 200 or 300 gallons of water... maybe the math—the numbers—do not matter, because this is about not about quantity but quality. About overflowing generosity, hospitality and abundance.

Moreover, the man has received a clear sign from G-d that this is the woman G-d has chosen to carry on the lineage of Abraham; Rebekah will become one of the great Matriarchies of G-d's chosen people.¹ So the man puts bracelets on her arm and a ring on the woman's nose, an act equivalent of giving Rebekah an engagement ring. Together they return to Rebekah's family where the man retells the story of how they met. He obtains the family's approval and blessing. Rebekah announces her consent to the upcoming union. And that is the story of how Rebekah leaves her family to become the spouse of Isaac.

Except this is not courtship in the way we usually think about the start of a relationship. The man at the well is not Isaac. The person telling the story is not Isaac. This is a story that unfolds by proxy, told and acted up by the servant sent out by Abraham to find a wife for Isaac, the son. So what of Isaac? Where is Isaac?

Last week we heard the well-known story of Abraham, Isaac and the ram, of how Abraham took Isaac, his "only" son, up Mount Moriah. At the last minute, Abraham saw a ram which he offered up in the place of his son. The following scripture passages follow the life of Abraham: of how Abraham came down Mount Moriah alone, of the time and money Abraham devotes to obtaining a burial place for his wife, Sarah; of Abraham, who gives all his riches to Isaac. But what of Isaac? About what happens to Isaac during the years that directly follow Mount Moriah, the scripture is frustratingly silent.

According to midrash, the Jewish oral tradition, after Mount Moriah, Isaac falls silent and never speaks to his father again. Isaac becomes a lost wanderer, self-exiled to the Negeb, the desert. One imagines that Isaac is carrying the deep burden of all that has happened, of his father's near sacrifice of him and of his mother's death. When Isaac reappears, he has returned from Beer-lahai-roi, the well linked with another family member's exile. Isaac has been at one water well, while Rebekah was at another well, watering camels. I think it is no accident that Isaac and Rebekah are first linked by wells, however distant. Water wells are places of hope and refreshment. In the Bible, water wells are often the promise of new beginnings. In this story, Rebekah is the focal point. Rebekah brings abundant water out of the well. Rebekah is the bringer of life. It is through her that the generations of Abraham will continue. Isaac and Rebekah become linked; yoked together as it were. And so the reading ends with these words "Isaac was comforted." Isaac is

¹ This homily writer uses G-d for the written name

forever marked by the trauma of Mount Moriah. But Isaac, whose name means “laughter” is able to laugh again. His burden has been made light.

I think about the heavy burdens people carry today; wearisome, exhausting, seemingly never ending burdens.

Some burdens are new, as new as the novel corona virus. The utter exhaustion on the faces of those in the front lines of health care; deep etched lines on their faces from the hourly press of face masks and eye protection. The heavy weight I feel when people in closed, indoor spaces insist that masks are too uncomfortable to wear.

Some burdens are centuries’ old, as old as the generations of toil demanded of a people, who ask where is this nation’s promise that all are created equal...endowed by their Creator [to]... life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The pit in the stomach feeling that I have as another name is added to the long list to shout aloud so they will not be forgotten.

Heavy, wearisome, exhausting, seemingly never ending burdens.

Jesus promises:²

“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.”

Jesus promises that if we learn from him, we, and the world will be refreshed and made anew. I wonder, am I Rebekah, someone who offers life giving water, someone who helps bring into being G-d’s kingdom of justice, mercy and compassion? I wonder, am I Isaac, lost, wandering in the desert, still waiting, wait for something? And I know that I am both.

Jesus says:

“Come to me, all you that are weary
Take my yoke upon you and you will find rest for your soul.”

This is G-d’s promise.

This is G-d’s love story for Isaac.

This is G-d’s love story for me.

This is G-d’s love story for all of us

AMEN

² Matthew 11: 25-30