

“Will you go?” Genesis 24:1-28, 53-67
the Rev. Michelle Slater and Debra Bowman
September 11, 2011

“Abraham was old, well advanced in years; and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things.” So begins this tale, not so much of love found as it is of generations continued. Abraham and his wife Sarah had been called by God, years before, to leave their home in Haran and travel to Canaan; had been promised that their descendants would be as many as the stars in the sky.

Yet that promise had been threatened, by years of infertility. It was only late in their lives that they were blessed with their one and only child, son Isaac. Now, the promise is in peril again. Sarah has died, and Abraham is dying, yet Isaac has still not had children of his own. For the future to be assured, Isaac needs a wife. So Abraham calls in the chief servant of his household and sends him to find one for his son. But not just any girl will do. She is to be from Abraham’s country of origin; she is to be of his people and his land.

So the servant heads back to the land Abraham and Sarah had come from. His task is no less than ensuring that Abraham and Sarah’s descendants are as numerous as the grains of sand on the beach, as God had pledged. So our matchmaker makes a deal with God. He’ll wait by the local well at the end of day, that time when the young women come to fill their jars. He’ll ask one of them for a drink. If she not only gives him water, but offers to water his camels also, he’ll know that she’s the one. “O Lord,” he prays, “...please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham.” And before the final words of his prayer are out of his mouth, along comes Rebekah.

“The girl was very fair to look upon,” we are told, “a virgin, who no man had known.” So far, so good. The steward runs up to the unsuspecting Rebekah: “Please let me sip a little water from your jar.” “Drink, my lord,” she says, and quickly lowers the jar from her head. And then, even better she adds, “I will draw for your camels also, until they have finished drinking.” She quickly empties what water she has into the trough and then runs back to the well to get more. Back and forth, back and forth, down to the well, back up to the trough.

Abraham’s servant can hardly believe how well this is going: she’s beautiful, generous and hospitable, energetic and decisive, and most important: available. But there is still one more thing before he can know if he has been successful. The right woman needs to be kin to Abraham. He must have been almost afraid to ask: “Tell me whose daughter you are.” And then the final good news, the sign of God’s providence and ongoing faithfulness to Abraham: Rebekah is the granddaughter of Abraham’s brother. She is indeed one of Abraham’s people.

So he brings out the jewelry and the gifts, while Rebekah runs to the house to tell the family about what has happened. And once they’ve heard the servant’s story of God’s faithfulness in providing the signs (not to mention, seen the wealth displayed by the servant, camels and bracelets and nose-rings), Rebekah’s family agrees to the match. And with the marriage arranged, the men settle down to seal the deal over drinks.

But in the morning, when the servant wants to hurry back home immediately, Rebekah’s

mother hesitates. Let her stay for ten more days. Give Rebekah time to prepare for departure, time to say goodbye, to hear final stories and words of wisdom from her mother. But the servant is anxious to leave, to complete his task for his master Abraham. And then we hear perhaps the most remarkable part of this story, perhaps the part that still bears wisdom for us. Rebekah's mother and brother say they'll ask Rebekah about her departure. She will be given a choice regarding her future. They call her out of the tent and put it to her. "Will you go with this man?"

Suddenly, the story pauses. Up until now there has been so much hurrying. The steward sets off immediately when Abraham sent him. He runs to Rebekah when he first sees her. She runs back and forth to the well for the camels, and then runs all the way home to tell her family the news. But now, on the verge of Rebekah's leaving, the storyteller takes a breath. There is a profound pause in the story of our ancestors, and tension in the future of God's people. "Will you go with this man?" Will you go? Will you leave all that is familiar, and be open to God's future, for you and your people? Will you respond to God's call? Will you go?

Up until this moment we have been given a number of indications of the character and quality of the one to be the next participant in God's promise. She is fair; she is honourable; she is kin to the generations who have been called earlier. She is generous and compassionate, offering not only a cup of cold water to the stranger but troughs full of water for the camels. Now, the history of God's people waits on the final sign: will she respond to God's invitation? "I will." And so she shows that she has not only the qualities of a good wife, but much more importantly, the gifts of a servant of God. A willing spirit, an openness to the adventure and the unknown future of God, a desire to embrace God's possibilities.

To many, the story of the revealing of Rebekah as Isaac's intended bride, tells us of the way God's plans are always fulfilled for those who trust in him. The servant relies on God to identify the bride for Isaac, and his prayers are answered. And so we are to conclude, Rebekah too can trust the will of God: God will take care of her as God cared for Abraham and the steward and all those others in the long line of ancestors of the faith.

Yet many of us are uncomfortable with this image of God moving us about like figures on a chessboard. We know that "God's plan" can too easily be offered as an explanation for both incredible joy and inexplicable suffering. "Oh well," we've heard, "it must be God's will." Yet we struggle with that easy explanation, knowing that life is more random than this, and God more compassionate and complex.

What I instead find inspiring in this story is the promise that God walks with us throughout the history of our ancestors, and along the paths of our own lives. Each character in our stories of faith is in conversation with God, seeking to understand God's will, seeking to comprehend God's way along the way. Rebekah's openness is not to a promise that things will go exactly as imagined, but rather openness to the unexpected possibilities of life with God.

But I'm confident that even if Rebekah had said no, the history of the Israelites would not have ended. Who knows how many people God called before Abraham? Who knows how many times Abraham and Sarah went left when God hinted at right? How many times do we make decisions without even wondering about God's will? And yet, how many times do we later recognize

God's blessing in the subsequent events, God's hand shaping the paths we've chosen to take?

It was certainly true for Rebekah. When she leaves her family, accompanying Abraham's servant to what will become her new home, she sees Isaac from a distance. And from her first glance at Isaac, Rebekah seems to be intrigued by him. Soon we hear that Isaac comes to love her, and is comforted after his mother's death.

Although God is never an active figure in the story, all the characters assume that God is at work in all of this. Each of them is confident that though they are ordinary people in ordinary situations, with their ordinary life decisions to make, that through them and their actions, God is at work. Abraham, his servant, Rebekah and her family, all trust that through their lives and their decisions, they are participating in providing the future God has planned.

The wonderful witness of our ancestors in the faith is not in their success in playing a kind of cosmic guessing-game with God about which is the right way to go, or the correct decision to make. It is in their trust that if you say yes, God will be with you on that path. And if you say no, God is ahead of you in the alternate direction. The question is, wherever we go, will we go with God?

At the beginning of a new church year, a lot of what lies ahead is unknown. What possibilities does God have in store for us this year, as individuals, as families? And, as we continue living into the Vision identified by the congregation a year ago, and work to implement the Strategic Ministry Plan we developed, as we continue in conversations with our neighbouring United Churches about a common future in ministry together, will we go with God? The good news is, whichever steps we take, to the right or to the left, whatever direction we choose to go, God is already at work in that future, shaping new possibilities for life and fruitfulness. In that trust, with that promise, we too find the courage to be open to God's action in our life. Thanks be to God! Amen.