

Text: Genesis 24: 1-26, 61-67
Title: The Betrothal
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I couldn't find the book I was looking for. There wasn't a copy at the library or at Borders and there wasn't time to order from Amazon, so I went to the Family Christian Bookstore....

And, I don't offer this as a smug-self-satisfied-smarty-pants, but I couldn't tell you the last time I was in a Family Christian Bookstore. There are so many other ways to get books; I just don't go there.

Yet, there I was with a few matronly black women talking comfortably about church over a background of light-rock praise music. The store was primarily Christian clutter; the trinkets had relegated the books to a few shelves. I still didn't find what I was looking for, but as I noticed the other titles it gradually dawned on me that the bulk of the books were guides to living. The nice lady behind the counter, who looked like she recently left a compound in Texas, gave me a pencil and a scrap of paper.

I scribbled down these titles:

The Life You've Always Wanted
Become a Better You: Seven Keys
Life Overflowing: Six Pillars
Your Best Life Now
Guard Us, Guide Us: Divine Leading in Life's Decisions
God has a Plan for Your Life
One Month to Live: Thirty Days to a No Regret Life
How to Let God Solve Your Problems
The Next Level: Finding Your Place in Life
Cure for the Common Life: Living in Your Sweet Spot
Finding God's Path through Your Trials

And my personal favorite:

Interviewing your Daughter's Date: 8 Steps to No Regrets

There were more, but you get the idea. I had stumbled into the self-help-through-God's-help section ~ God has personal trainer. It was most of the books in the store. Now, I am sure that these books and the accompanying DVDs, workshops, study guides, and conferences are helpful God blessed tools in people's lives. I have every confidence that God uses all sorts of ways to work his will.

But clearly, these books, and a library of others, tap into the notion that God has a particular plan for your life. There is a market share for discovering God's will for your life. Discerning God's will in life's decisions is big business....

And lest we scoff ~ it is big business for us. For, in a variety of ways, with a variety of you, in a variety of settings, I have heard these sorts of questions:

Which job is God's will?
Does God want me to take this one or that one?

*How do I know if this is really the person that God has for me?
What school does God want me to go to?
If that door closes which window is God opening?
What course of medical action should we follow?
Is this all that God has for my life?
How can I know God's will?*

You get the idea. There is an undercurrent, an assumption, that God has a particular will for life and faithfulness or fruitfulness is found in finding and following God's plan. Our task is sharpening our spiritual sight to see the signs and search for the secret. Our challenge is hearing God's will over the will of this wide windy wild world.

Dear friends, one way to read this morning's text is an early narrative of how God leads through special revelatory signs.

Gideon put out his fleece.

Noah had a rainbow.

Abraham saw a blazing torch.

Moses had a burning bush.

And this trusty old servant found God's leading in a young woman offering water to camels. God leads in mysterious ways. Therefore, what metaphoric camels in your life need watering to determine God's will?

Okay, that is one way to read this text, and maybe not the most helpful, but rather than dismiss the question and discard the text ~ is there a way to read this ancient story that is meaningful and helpful for today?

It is the longest chapter in Genesis. While there are scant few details of Abraham's journey to Moriah to sacrifice Isaac, this story has a leisurely pace, with details told twice, and a wonderful, warm hearted, unnamed servant, who invites God into the mix. And, there are contextual and colorful details that are worthy of note.

Sarah was dead, and if you do the biblical math, Isaac was about 40. Abraham is not long for this world either, and while God has made in Isaac a first installment on his covenant promise, there is no evidence that Isaac is doing his part for the next chapter. So, Abraham sends a servant back to the old country to insure that Isaac has an acceptable bride.

The covenant promise is about place and progeny, and as one scholar puts it in circumcision "the male organ of generation" bears the sign of that covenant. Abraham commands his servant to swear an oath by grabbing his genitals. *Put your hand under my thigh* – is a delicate euphemism.

Now, I doubt that many of the books at the Christian Family Bookstore instruct this sort of intimacy in determining God's will, but the oath symbolized once again the promise of procreation. This narrative nudges along the fulfillment of God's promise of descendants through the promise of a servant.

The servant travels with a dowry ~ camels, gold and gifts ~ and prays for a sign. With a delightful desire to do right by Abraham, and having no idea how to determine an appropriate bride, the servant sets up a test for the first woman at the local watering hole to show kindness not just to him, but to the camels as well.

But, before he can get out “a-men” there stands Rebekah in the late afternoon sun ~ beautiful, a virgin, and generous of spirit. He asks for sip; she gives a big gulp, and offers to water the camels as well.

One biblical scholar offers this summary.

...an average camel drinks about 106 liters of water. Ten camels means 1060 liters of water. If you use a 20 liter pail that means 53 pails of water. An average well had 50 steps down into the water. Those are small steps built into the wall of the well. Imagine you have to carry a pail down 50 steps, scoop up 20 liters of water, walk up 50 steps out of the well, and do it 53 times....

Now, I don't know about all those averages, but the narrative is clear that whatever Rebekah was doing, she was doing with some haste. In four short verses Rebekah is the subject of eleven verbs of action and one of speech. She is “a continuous whirlwind of purposeful activity.” (Just what you want in a wife.....)

She is running,
 and fetching,
 and fixing,
 and offering a place for the servant and his entourage,
 and eventually leaving behind kith and kin to follow the gold ring
 in her nose back to Isaac and give birth to Jacob and Esau... and

.....

And, it is a wonderful story.

But, Walter Brueggemann reminds us that this is a “secular” story. There is no evidence that God is active. God is not breaking in to speak. God is not making promises or giving commandments. There is no direct discernable divine direction. There is an oath, and a petition, and a prayer of thanksgiving directed toward God, but this is not a story of intervention, or interruption, or instruction.

And yet, this is also the only occasion in Genesis where the term *nahah* (lead) is used. *Nahah* usually refers to guidance in the wilderness or a kind of personal well-being in a time of stress. The best known is Psalm 23:

*He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness, for his name sake.*

In Genesis 24 it used to describe this series of events. In the words of servant:

Praise be to the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master. As for me, the Lord led me on the journey...

Dear friends I don't know how to determine God's particular direction for life. I don't know how we reach decisions about when to retire, or what to do for work, or what to wear. Sometimes the whole questions strikes me as self indulgent,
 sometimes it strikes me a privilege of class and culture,

sometimes I think we worry more about what God doesn't say clearly than what he does (to paraphrase Mark Twain).

And, quite frankly I am not convinced that God has one special plan, or path, or partner for each life.

But, I know that like rebar in cement there is an under-girding of God that holds the whole road together. And so, maybe this text is a delightful reminder of the "hidden, inscrutable, guidance of God." And, it resists the religious romanticism of God steering us to parking places and promotions on the one hand ~ and on the other hand, the callous cynicism that we are alone and adrift and without guidance.

Could it be that in a story of something so common in dusty desert hills as thirsty camels at a watering hole there is a reminder

that all of life is under God's providential care,
that he will bring events to their covenantal end,
and that no part of life is outside of God's attention or intention?

Walter Brueggemann puts it this way:

In a culture which grasps for visible signs of faith, which is driven toward scientism, and which falls for too many religious quackeries, this story stands as a foil against easy and mistaken faith. The workings of God are not spectacular, not magical, not oddities. Disclosure of God comes by steady discernment and readiness to trust the resilience that is present in the course of daily affairs.

I don't know what intersections you are approaching.

I don't know what decisions you are facing.

I don't know what places you are looking for guidance from God.

But, I do know that they fall under the sovereign umbrella of God's will.

And that good decision or bad mistake doesn't alter that fact.

And the story of God's will is often better told looking in the rear view mirror than squinting through the windshield for a certain sign on the highway.

So, may we join that unnamed servant in praying that simple statement of faith:

Praise be to the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master. As for me, the Lord led me on the journey...

For as God faithfully led in the past, so he leads today, and he so he will tomorrow.

Amen.