

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Boston
Year A, Proper 9
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be always acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

If you have been following along with the narrative of our Old Testament readings, you may notice that in Year A of the three-year liturgical cycle, we start from the beginning.

If you have ever had the notion that you were just going to sit down and read the Bible straight through starting at page one, you may recall these stories the best—because there is no doubt that once you got to the legalistic matters of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, especially in Leviticus, you glazed over all of the cubits and shekels and laws and perhaps just skipped to the final chapter (Revelation) to ensure that it all turned out the way you thought it might.

The stories of our forbears—of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, Isaac, Rebekah—these are the stories which ground the people of Israel, which grounded all of Jesus' imagery and history. They are not meant to pre-figure Jesus in any sort of way—the Old Testament isn't a prequel to the New, no matter how much our limited language coerces many to imagine it that way. The stories of the people who were given a promise of a different life as people of a different, single God, Yahweh—are foundational in that they trace dual lines of discovery—how a certain group of humans tried to understand and follow their God, and how God tried to understand and guide these particular humans.

Not that the stories we get in the first few chapters of Genesis are deeply heartening, however.

Two weeks ago, our first reading was Abraham expelling Hagar and their son together, Ishmael, into the wilderness to salve Sarah's jealousy and rage after she finally gave birth to Isaac. It was Sarah's idea in the first place for Abraham to have a child with Hagar, and then she would take the child as her own to live into the promises of an heir (pro tip: this works out about as well as you imagine it would). Casting Hagar and Ishmael into the desert, they are finally saved by an angel, and then find their own way through the wilderness and into their own future.

The script is then flipped on Abraham, and last week God told Abraham to kill his remaining son, Isaac, in the story known as the Aqedah, the Binding of Isaac. God stayed Abraham's hand at the last minute substituting a ram, but the relative horrors of the last two weeks' texts have some staying power. These aren't quite the stories we anticipate hearing about a beloved God caring for and guiding God's own people.

This week is basically a biblical rom-com/ meet-cute compared to these past two weeks of readings. Spoiler alert, no one is commanded to die in this scripture. In fact, zero people are maimed, and plenty of people (and animals) are watered. God doesn't appear in this pericope other than the servant's prayer being answered in a very convenient, and literal fashion. The

servant, given the fairly weighty task by Abraham to find Isaac a suitable wife, prays for a ‘sign’ from God—the one who gives him water from the well, and offers to water his camels, will be the one who can marry into this very storied, very complicated family.

Rebekah comes along, and does exactly what the servant asked of God—and we know that she wasn’t following formalities or just being polite, because no one in their right mind offers to water another person’s camels—not that this is common knowledge these days, but camels drink A LOT. Offering to water another person’s camels is akin to inviting someone over for a cup of coffee, and then when they arrive, treating them to a multi-course feast AND detailing their car while they eat it. It is also possible that Rebekah had a slightly ulterior motive in taking her time at the well—notice who her brother is—Laban. We’ll hear more about him in the upcoming weeks, but let’s just say he’s a piece of work. It’s possible that watering camels was preferable to staying home with the family.

The servant is duly impressed by Rebekah, and consents are made all around that Rebekah will travel back with the servant to meet Isaac. And she does. And they are married, and Isaac, we are told, loves her. And that love and companionship gives him comfort after the death of his mother, Sarah.

It sometimes feels like there should be more plot to the story after these past two weeks of readings with wild and mortal twists. The expulsions, betrayals, looming death, makes for sensationalistic reading, the kind you can’t walk away from, because no matter how harrowing it is, you want to see what happens next.

But there isn’t a plot twist here. And it feels a bit anticlimactic, doesn’t it?

Consider how we often want the kingdom of God HERE NOW. We rely on feeling that something is happening to imagine that God is present—either that God is actively intervening in either a horrifying or salvific way, or God isn’t acting at all. Imagine, if you will, the last time you read or watched the news, and your heart sank, and you just thought, with not a hint of exhaustion, we’re all doomed. Nothing will ever get better.

Then consider Abraham’s abandonment of Ishmael and Hagar. His aborted attempt at killing Isaac. The promises of his whole life, his whole being, are put to the test in those moments. And then we have this simple story of Rebekah at the well, filling up a stranger’s camels. And recognizing God in the midst of both can feel incongruous only if we imagine that God’s work only happens on the large scale, and not on every single level of human lives.

In so many ways, we have been trained to look for God in the “big” or terrible or thrilling parts of our existence—writ into the fabric of the mental images we have of the emergent kingdom of God. That God’s own righteousness is something grand and great or awe-filled. That our God is a God of earthquakes, or exhilaratingly moving sunsets, but not of a drizzly Tuesday or the afternoon commute. We expect God’s work to be larger than we are, and in many ways it is, and always has been and always will be.

And because it is larger than we are, God's promises are not kept to the stunning moments, but have infused themselves into all parts of our existence, allowing each of those pieces integrity and holiness.

The story of Rebekah at the well is a story of hope. Of God at work in God's timeframe, not ours. Every time the promises of God's abiding presence and love are threatened to be waylaid or annihilated, there is also a quieter, less headline-worthy, story which points us to the future. Rebekah offering to water camels. The servant's quiet trust in God's work. The receiving of consents to be wed. The possibility of Abraham's line—which was God's original promise of new life to him-- continuing even after it appeared doomed so many times. Even Rebekah was quietly stepping into hope as she consented to a new life, literally looking into the possibility held in the future when she saw Isaac across the desert before they met. As was Isaac as he traveled to meet them.

We want God to work in leaps and bounds so deeply, that we forget that God's work in inches is also holy.

The Gospel today finds Jesus reminding the crowds that not one of the prophets they had anticipated in either John the Baptist or him came as they had expected— John the ascetic, whom they assumed was ill or possessed; Jesus who ate with all, and whom they accused of being a drunk and glutton. Is it possible, Jesus asks crowds, that God might be taking an unexpected pathway—one which isn't as familiar to our notions of what God might be doing? Is it possible that God is using that which is ordinary—even mundane—to proclaim God's presence, because, well, God can? That what we consider foolishness is just God's work unrecognized because it isn't how *we*, in our limited ways, thought it would be?

Even a meet-cute at a well can be part of God's own promise and presence.

When our hearts get too tied up and exhausted from the ups and downs of kingdom building and sometimes kingdom demolition, we can recall Rebekah at the well. Hardly newsworthy as an interaction, but friends, perhaps most holy, hopeful, moments are.

Amen.