



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SIXTH DAY AFTER PENTECOST, JULY 5, 2026

GENESIS 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; SONG OF SOLOMON 2:8-13; ROMANS 7:15-25a; MATTHEW 11:16-19, 25-30

A HISTORY THAT HOLDS

What kind of origin story is this? We want our founding fathers and mothers to be heroes, don't we? We want them to be exceptional. We want them to model how we can use our freedom to liberate others and be an example of justice and righteousness to the world – and instead, we get the book of Genesis. Who would write a history like this – with spiritual ancestors who are just as flawed as we are? We have choices; why hold onto this set of stories as our own?

Two weeks ago, we saw Abraham, the one St. Paul calls “the father of us all,” and his wife Sarah treat Hagar shamefully. Today's reading won't let us forget that they were, in fact, slaveholders who viewed those enslaved to them as signs of God's favor and blessing. This is appalling. However long ago the Abraham stories lived as oral history, they were written down centuries later. Given that, I

find it fascinating that a people defined by their deliverance from slavery in Egypt would seemingly take pride in their ancestors being slaveholders themselves.

Who knows? Perhaps it's a sign of moral complexity and humility – a reminder that nothing human is foreign to us, that the roles of oppressed and oppressor aren't fixed and often have more to do with circumstance than character. That's more nuance than many of us are prepared for this weekend. I'll be honest; there are days when I just want my heroes back.

Who better to help me than Marilynne Robinson? In novels like *Gilead* and *Lila*, she writes as beautifully about the life of faith as any living writer I've encountered – and she published a book in 2024 called *Reading Genesis*. If anyone can help me hold onto my heroes, she can. And yet, she's more cynical about Isaac and

Rebekah's "courtship" than I ever thought to be. Yes, arranged marriages based on kinship were common in ancient times. But this relationship seems to be based on love. We're told that Isaac loved Rebekah, right? Besides, we like having an excuse, outside of weddings, to hear the erotic love poetry of the Song of Solomon out loud in church. It feels a little naughty. Can't we just gloss over any complicating details and let our romantic notions lie?

Personally, I've always drawn strength from Rebekah's kindness and courage here and, thankfully, Robinson doesn't burst my bubble on that front. Rebekah passes a test she doesn't even know she's taking. It's one thing to offer a drink to a thirsty man in the desert. It's quite another to quench the thirst of ten camels. She doesn't know yet who she's helping; she simply sees a need and chooses to fill it. Likewise, she then chooses to leave the land of her ancestors to marry a man she's never met and start a new life. As someone who moved 3000 miles away from my family back East to take this call, I appreciate her choice – and I take comfort in it. She'll make more questionable, even reprehensible, choices later, but at least they're her choices. No one else dares to make them for her. I like that about her.

Contrast this with Isaac, the most passive of the patriarchs. There's nothing wrong with going with the flow, but it doesn't exactly make him a thrilling suitor. This woman who hauled hundreds of gallons of water for a stranger's camels is greeted by her prospective husband with not so much as a cup of cold water – at least as we're given the story here. Our novelist Marilynne Robinson imagines Rebekah reacting as any of us might - who find that the greatest hope of our spouse is that we'll be just like their mom. She reads Rebekah's later machinations in the light of this disappointment and sours any simplistic notions of "happily ever after."

What might this origin story have to do with us as we consider our own origin stories as a nation this weekend? The stories we tell ourselves about the past matter. They shape how we hold ourselves accountable for the present and how we imagine the future. Stories that only allow us to be the good guys are not solid enough to sustain us. They assume that our flaws somehow erase our achievements - when they don't. They assume that good and evil cannot coexist in the same heart - when we all know that they do. We can still have our heroes, but we don't need to hold onto them as if they are our hope. Why should their struggle

against evil be any easier than ours? Our hope is not in our ancestors' ability to live up to their highest ideals. It's in the God who created both them and us for good.

Here is where Marilynne Robinson ended up coming to my aid. She reminded me of what I know on my best days to be true. God's vast and generous intent for us unfolds over centuries, often written in a hand too big for us to read. God's love is so strong and loyal and steadfast that it allows space for us to be the complicated creatures we are. God respects the integrity of our choices and lets us live with them - but won't finally be constrained by them. God will continue

working through us and despite us for good. Or in her words, God's blessing "does not reveal its whole meaning in the course of any life or generation or era. This is the freedom of God in which humankind is free." That means we can look honestly at what we've done and left undone with our freedom these last 250 years. We can claim the grace that sustains all families of the earth, and we can learn to walk in new ways. We can repent and repair what is still broken without it breaking us - and we can celebrate and nurture the good that's here now and is still possible. In the Name of the One whose freedom sets us free - Amen.

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67 [*The servant said to Laban, "I am Abraham's servant. The Lord has greatly blessed my master, and he has become wealthy; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys. And Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master when she was old; and he has given him all that he has. My master made me swear, saying, 'You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I live; but you shall go to my father's house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son.' "I came today to the spring, and said, 'O Lord, the God of my master Abraham, if now you will only make successful the way I am going! I am standing here by the spring of water; let the young woman who comes out to draw, to whom I shall say, "Please give me a little water from your jar to drink," and who will say to me, "Drink, and I will draw for your camels also"—let her be the woman whom the Lord has appointed for my master's son.' "Before I had finished speaking in my heart, there was Rebekah coming out with her water jar on her shoulder; and she went down to the spring, and drew. I said to her, 'Please let me drink.' She quickly let down her jar from her shoulder, and said, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels.' So I drank, and she also watered the camels. Then I asked her, 'Whose daughter are you?' She said, 'The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor's son, whom Milcah bore to him.' So I put the ring on her nose, and the bracelets on her arms. Then I bowed my head and worshiped the Lord, and blessed the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me by the right way to obtain the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son. Now then, if you will deal loyally and truly with my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so that I may*

turn either to the right hand or to the left.” And they called Rebekah, and said to her, “Will you go with this man?” She said, “I will.” So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham’s servant and his men. And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, “May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes.” Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man; thus the servant took Rebekah, and went his way. Now Isaac had come from Beer-lahai-roi, and was settled in the Negeb. Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field; and looking up, he saw camels coming. And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, and said to the servant, “Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us?” The servant said, “It is my master.” So she took her veil and covered herself. And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death.



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