



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY, CANON FOR CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 9, JULY 5, 2020

GENESIS 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; SONG OF SOLOMON 2:3-13; ROMANS 7:15-25a; MATTHEW 11:16-19, 25-30

## FAMILY STORIES

My great-grandmother Lizzie Knoche was born in 1882 in a small farming town in eastern Iowa, the 1<sup>st</sup> generation American daughter of German Lutheran parents. When she was 18 years old, she met and fell in love with my great-grandfather, Jim O'Neil, who was 7 years older and Irish Catholic through and through. When Lizzie's father learned that she was interested in an Irish Catholic man, he forbade her to see Jim and refused to speak the "O'Neil" family name even though it made small-town conversation difficult at times.

For the next 10 years, Lizzie and Jim saw each other in secret, certain they were meant for each other but unable to marry and unwilling to defy Lizzie's parents. Finally, Lizzie's mother got tired of her daughter's longing and moping and made a decision. Knowing there was no way to change her husband's mind, she herself held the ladder up to her daughter's 2<sup>nd</sup> story bedroom window so Lizzie could climb out in the middle of the night and elope with Jim.

When I was growing up, I heard this tale every time we visited my Iowa relatives, and it was always told with emphasis on Jim and Lizzie's persistence, her

mother's boldness, and her father's surprising change of heart once the couple was married. It is one of those family stories that has somehow carried identity and blessing for many generations despite the unsettling prejudice and stubbornness that lurks underneath.

Our first reading from Genesis is part of a touchstone story for the Judeo-Christian tradition. Although we only hear snippets today, the full tale of Rebekah and Isaac's betrothal is a leisurely account of fate, chance, surprising behavior, and divine intervention. It begins with Abraham on his deathbed, who decides to arrange a marriage for his son, Isaac. He is intent on a match with a woman of his own tribe and religion, so Abraham sends a servant and 10 camels loaded with gifts to his hometown to find her.

When Abraham's servant arrives outside Nahor, he stops at the well and prays that God will give him a sign, anticipating that the woman who shares her water with him is the one. And behold, Rebekah appears, remarkable for her beauty and lineage. When the servant asks for water, she offers her jug to him and draws water for his camels as well.

To us, this sounds like an ordinary thing to do, but to people who know camels, it's an extraordinary feat. Because after a long desert journey, a camel would drink many gallons of water – and there are 10 camels here. So, imagine Rebekah hurrying down the steps to the well, filling her jug and rushing back to the animals' trough enough times to carry 60 or 70 gallons of water. She would have been a blur of non-stop motion and strength.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, she is remarkable for many reasons.

So, realizing that Rebekah is indeed the answer to his prayer, Abraham's servant gives her jewelry and goes to meet her family, who consent to the marriage. More gifts are given, feasting ensues, and the next morning, the servant prepares to return to Canaan. Rebekah's family asks for an extended engagement, wanting to put off her departure, but they allow her to make the decision. "I will go now," she says. And so she does, with an entourage befitting of a young woman from a prosperous family. She and Isaac see each other from afar and their destiny settles on them. Our reading concludes, "Isaac took Rebekah as his wife and he loved her."

This is considered the first great love story in the Bible and it's the first time the word "love" is applied to the relationship of two adult partners. But to our ears, this tale can be off-putting. Abraham directs his servant to "go, get a wife for my son," in the same way he might say, "go, get a choice goat and prepare it for dinner." When the servant puts the ring on Rebekah's nose as a sign of favor, it also looks like a

tag of ownership and control. Rebekah gets to choose *when* she marries Isaac, but it's not clear she gets a choice *if* she marries him. Those were the customs of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, but that objectification of women is still painful.

And yet, this is the story whose lectionary response is the tender Song of Solomon, "My beloved speaks and says to me: 'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.'" The tale of Rebekah and Isaac is one of those family stories that somehow carries identity and blessing for generations despite the unsettling power dynamics that lurk underneath.

I have been thinking a lot about foundational stories lately – my own, our country's, our church's, and those in the Bible. These stories tell us who we are and whose we are. But the thing is, in the retelling, these stories can be misleading. Sometimes they become dangerously sentimental, so thoroughly conflated with valor, goodness, or success, that when other memories intrude – the terrible temper, the selfishness or deceit – we don't know what to do. So we silence and hide the difficult parts, insisting on a uniformly positive narrative.

Other times, family or foundational stories can be so flooded with injustice and trauma that we can't remember any of our sources of strength or resilience. It is hard to bear the tension of complicated history and keep our grounding, but that is exactly what the spiritual journey is all about.

Along with thousands of other people, I watched the film of the musical "Hamilton" on Friday (and

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Alter, The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary, Volume 1, p. 79.

rewatched it yesterday!). I was as moved as when I saw it on stage several years ago. At the end of the show George Washington says, “Let me tell you what I wish I’d known when I was young and dreamed of glory.

You have no control who lives, who dies, who tells your story.” It is a culminating moment in a fuller, more complicated story of our founding fathers told with fierce compassion by people whose ancestors were almost entirely excluded from the narrative. And in that retelling, the Holy Spirit has room to move, stirring up a sense of renewal, courage, and healing.

We may not be able to choose who tells our story when we are gone, but we can choose how fully we tell it today. Lizzie and Jim’s marriage was a victory of love over prejudice *and* it was painfully stretched during the Great Depression. Isaac and Rebekah’s story is rich with love *and later*, deep strife as their sons compete for their inheritance. The burden of pain and wrongs does not negate the promise and love of relationships, but it does underscore our deep need for grace, repentance, and reconciliation – not only in our personal lives but in our communal life and our national life as well.

We long for grace, forgiveness, and wholeness.

Jesus responds, “Come to me all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens; and I will give you rest.” In the gospel he speaks to people weighed down by the harsh rule of the Roman empire, and today he speaks to people weighed down by quarantine, confusion, and civic chaos.

“Arise, my love, and come to me,” God says, “bring your full story and learn your deepest identity. I am gentle and humble in heart and you are mine. Come and find rest for your souls. Come.”

**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..]