

*Gracious Love
Genesis 24
July 30, 2023
Pastor Sarah Wiles*

Since our last story, Sarah has died, and Abraham is now a very old man. He's getting his affairs in order and it's time for Isaac to be married. Abraham sends his most trusted servant to find a wife for Isaac back in their homeland among their extended family. The servant was worried that he might find a suitable woman, but she wouldn't want to leave, and he suggested bringing Isaac along.

But Abraham was adamant that Isaac stay in Canaan, in the land God had led them to so long ago. He reassured his servant, "I'm sure you'll find the right person. She'll come with you."

So, the servant loaded up gifts and went in search of a bride for Isaac. He got to the well outside of the city Abraham and Sarah were from in the evening, when women usually come to draw water. He stopped there and prayed to God: Help me. You're always faithful. Open my eyes so that I can see the right woman here.

The words were barely out of his mouth when Rebekah, a distant relative of Abraham's, came to the well with a water jug on her shoulder. She was stunningly beautiful. She was old enough to be married, but she was still single. She went to the well and filled her jug. The servant ran to meet her and said, "Please, can I have a sip of water?"

She said, "Of course! Have a drink! I'll get some water for your camels, too." She gave him a drink, and then poured the rest into the trough for the camels, and ran back to the well to get more, and kept at it until she had watered all the camels.

The servant was getting excited. Maybe this was the one! He asked her about her family, and it turned out that sure enough, her family was related to Abraham's. He asked if he could stay at her house for the evening and she welcomed him enthusiastically. At that moment, he was sure she was the right one.

Rebekah ran ahead and told her mother and everyone what had happened, and they were ready to welcome the servant when he got there. They threw open their arms and their doors and fed his camels and made a big feast.

As they were sitting down to eat, the servant insisted on telling his whole story before they started to eat. Everyone was amazed at how things had worked out, and the servant popped the question: could Rebekah marry Isaac? Her parents immediately agreed. They felt it was meant to be and were overjoyed. Everyone lingered long over dinner that night.

The next morning the servant was so excited to go back and bring Rebekah with him and tell the whole story of how God worked things out. He didn't want to waste a minute, but Rebekah's parents weren't quite so sure about Rebekah leaving so quickly. They asked if maybe she could stay behind for a few weeks and then go. But the servant really wanted her to go with him right then, so her parents said, "Let's ask Rebekah what she'd like to do."

They asked her, and she almost shouted, "Yes! I want to go today!" So, her parents sent them off and blessed Rebekah as she went.

One evening, Isaac went out to the field. He was walking and meditating when he looked up and saw the caravan in the distance. Rebekah caught sight of Isaac at the same moment. Her breath caught in her chest, and she could barely ask the servant, "Who is the man in the field?"

"That's Isaac," he said.

She took her scarf and covered herself and rode on to meet him. When they got to him, as Rebekah got down from her camel, the servant told the whole story again. And Isaac looked at Rebekah and loved her. They were married, and she was a great comfort to him, especially after his mother's death.

...

For the Wisdom of God in scripture,
for the Wisdom of God among us,
for the Wisdom of God within us,
thanks be to God.

...

This is such a sweet story. It feels like the tellers relished telling it. In fact, part of the reason we didn't read the text directly from the Bible is because it does, literally, repeat itself again and again, each person rehashing the story of the person before—which is how real conversation works, but is very tedious to read. And this is not a story that should be tedious. It is a story to be felt. And so, rather than analyzing or over-explaining, what if we just notice two things?

The first thing we might notice is what God does.

—What *does* God do? In every other story in Genesis, we've had so far, God actually appears, or speaks, or at least sends physical messengers. There's a breaking in, a physicality to God's presence and action. But here there's none of that.

God's name pops up throughout the story. Abraham trusts that God will work things out. The servant prays for help and watches and waits to see how God might be at work, and thanks God when things do work out. Rebekah's family hears the servant's story, and it helps them see God at work, too. But we never get the narrator saying, "and then God did such and such."

The story is all about these people's experience and perception of the Holy moving within the fabric of their lives. God doesn't break into this story in some remarkable way. The whole story is just saturated with grace. God's love permeates their lives—in their worries and their hopes and their hindsight.

It can be like that for us, too. In fact, I think that's the way it is most of the time. Sometimes we forget. We forget to look and listen, to pause at the end of the day or during a crisis or a boring afternoon and ask, is something more going on? We forget to stop, like this servant did, and wonder silently, could something sacred be going on here?

It's okay that we forget to do that. That's how humans are. We're forgetful. Often, we figure it out in hindsight, or we see it in someone else's story—the way that Rebekah's family saw it in the servant's story.

That's part of why we gather in worship, so that we'll have a weekly reminder: oh yeah, there's more in the world than meets the eye. We gather so that we can hear each other's stories, and the stories of those who've gone before to remind us that we live in a holy, God-saturated world.

Nothing miraculous happens—in the sense of breaking the laws of physics. A guy goes to find a wife for his master’s son. He finds just the right person, and they fall in love. It’s lovely, but not that remarkable. But because of how the people in this story looked at the world because Abraham, and the servant, and Rebekah, and her family, and Isaac all assume that God is at work and are looking for that liveliness, that delight, and that steadfast faithfulness, this ordinary thing becomes a window into God’s beauty and holiness and love.

I’d like to live like that.

The second thing we might notice is how Isaac loved Rebekah. Immediately. Completely. Without much reason. As the poet says, he loved her “without knowing how, or when, or from where.”¹ I like to imagine that Rebekah loved him the same way, that that’s what made her jump down when she saw him across the field.

It’s like movie love. Which might make us roll our eyes.

Sacraments are ordinary things that reveal God. For example, in baptism we take ordinary water, from the same faucet that we use to wash the dishes, and in it we find that we are absolutely soaked in God’s love. In communion we take ordinary bread—sometimes from Kroger, ordinary juice—sometimes the store brand, and are deeply nourished and connected. I envy Roman Catholics because instead of just two official sacraments, they have seven—seven official times where you can see God’s grace in an ordinary thing. And, really, how could there really be just seven? But one of their official ones is marriage. They say when two people love each other, you see a reflection of God’s love.

It is true that sometimes marriage doesn’t work out and creates more heartache than joy. And some of us aren’t called to marriage. And that is good, too; singleness can offer an openness and spaciousness that enables a broad and wide love. There are countless ways to meet God. But it’s also true that sometimes in our best loves we can catch a glimpse of God’s love. In the well-worn faithfulness of a long marriage, in a brief moment of calm in a tumultuous marriage, in the deep joy of committed companionship and friendship, or, like here with Isaac and Rebekah, in head-over-heels love at first sight, the world shimmers and we see a hint of the magnificence of God’s love.

Because, scripture tells us again and again, this is what God’s love for us is like: it’s immediate and complete; it has no preconditions or requirements. It doesn’t make any sense. It’s like Isaac and Rebekah, catching a glimpse of each other across a field and falling in love. That’s how God loves you.

God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being—as close as our very breath. The Divine is at work, in ordinary ways in ordinary lives. And God loves you. The way Rebekah and Isaac loved each other, but even more so—head over heels, no preconditions, love at first sight.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023

¹ Pablo Neruda, “One Hundred Love Sonnets: XVII,” translated by Mark Eisner