

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67
 June 29, 2008

Today's Old Testament lesson comes from Genesis, Chapter 24. I will be skipping around as I read Chapter 24, so for today, I invite you to simply listen, and hear God's Words spoken, as it has been shared from generation to generation. Today's lesson tells the story of the search for a wife for Isaac. The story is long, comprising all of Chapter 24, but the lectionary is gracious, giving us only the pieces necessary to telling the story. In Chapter 23, we have learned that Sarah, wife of the patriarch, Abraham, the one who laughed when she learned that she would be a mother in her old age, has died, leaving her husband and her now grown son, Isaac, alone. Her death has led the family to a new crisis; suddenly Abraham realizes that he will not live forever, and he must pass on the faith and to his son, and in turn, his son must now become the vessel through which God fulfills God's promise. The crisis is described in the introduction to chapter 24.

Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years; and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things. Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his house, who had charge of all that he had, "Put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, but will go to my country and to my kindred and get a wife for my son Isaac." The servant said to him, "Perhaps the woman may not be willing to follow me to this land; must I then take your son back to the land from which you came?" Abraham said to him, "See to it that you do not take my son back there. The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and swore to me, 'To your offspring I will give this land,' he will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there. But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this oath of mine; only you must not take my son back there."

Abraham's servant sets out for the land of his kindred, and faithfully seeks out a wife for Isaac. The lesson continues as the servant of Abraham meets with Leban, Rebekah's brother, and recounts to how God has shown Rebekah to be the one chosen by God for Isaac.

34 So he said, "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.'

42 "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 (Be thoo' el), 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.”

58 And they called Rebekah, and said to her, “Will you go with this man?” She said, “I will.” 59 So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham’s servant and his men. 60 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.” 61 Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man; thus the servant took Rebekah, and went his way. 62 Now Isaac had come from Beer-lahai-roi (bir'le hi'roi), and was settled in the Negeb. 63 Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field; and looking up, he saw camels coming. 64 And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, 65 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. 66 And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. 67 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.

As you know, I’ve been spending a lot of time at Mo Ranch this summer. Kelsey Kemp and I went 3 weeks ago for Mo TLC and last week Casey Durham and I took 6 high school youth down for Youth Celebration. I have one more week to go; next week James Kinder and I will take 6 middle school youth to Jr. High Jubilee. That’s a lot of Mo Ranch! Of course I love it down there even if I do come back sore and exhausted. What’s not to love, except maybe the food, but even that is pretty good some of the time! There are so many things to love at Mo Ranch, but the best part for me is spending time with some extraordinary young people.

At TLC, which stands for Teen Leadership Conference, I was privileged to serve as the worship leader. Ordinarily at youth conferences, if you are the worship leader, you will plan and lead worship. But, at TLC, you teach the kids how to plan and lead worship. The only time I got to participate in worship the entire week was during our closing communion! By the end of the week the kids were writing all of their liturgy, so we spent a lot of time talking about prayer...the anatomy of a prayer...different types of prayer...the different ways we pray...the role of prayer in worship...everything! As we were planning our Healing and Wholeness Service, the youth said that they wanted to be available to pray with those who wanted prayers for particular concerns. For the first time all week, I was a little bit nervous about saying “go for it.” I mean, a service for wholeness and healing is a pretty emotional service, and many of these kids are carrying heavy loads. I knew the kids in my group were talented, but they did start the week wanting to bless our food with “Rub-a-dub, dub, thanks for the grub, Yeah God!” I knew this week was about teaching leadership, so I talked to them about praying for one another. We talked a lot. In the end, they were convinced they could do it, and they convinced me they could do it, so with fear and trepidation, I said yes. During the service that evening, I chose to take one of my own concerns to a prayer team. As I shared my concern, they listened intently, and then from those youth came the most amazing prayer. Later my worship team laid hands on me and as a group prayed for me, and I have to tell you it was powerful.

Learning to pray is not something that we learn all at once, it’s something that we learn over time. As we grow up in faith, and as our understanding of God increases, the nature of our prayer changes. For a young child, prayer is primarily petition; like everything else in a young child’s life, prayer revolves around the child and his needs. This is what we call the vending machine God. You know what will happen when you put your money in the slot and push the button; you snack will pop out. This is how children expect prayer to work.

With a little teaching and a great deal of modeling, children expand their prayer to include praise and thanksgiving and petitions for others. But it takes a mature faith to discover that prayer is not a monologue, but a dialogue. Prayer is not simply us coming to God with all of our stuff, unloading it and simply walking away. Prayer requires that we not only bring our joys our sorrows, our needs and our brokenness to God, but also that we wait for the Lord, that we listen for God's voice, that we seek God's will. This is particularly true for Christian leaders. If we are going to lead God's people, we must first be led by God. But the trick is that in order to truly be open to God's guidance and we must first give up a stake in the outcome.

It appears that Abraham has learned a lot in his 100+ years of following God. When the new crisis arrived with Sarah's death, Abraham did not take things into his own hands, but put all things in God's hands, trusting that God would secure the future for God's promises. This has not always been the case. Remember when God first promised Abraham heirs? Abraham looked at his wife Sarah and at himself in his advance years and got a little anxious about how they could possibly bring children into the world to fulfill God's promise. Remember what he did? First he tried to make his servant his heir. Some scholars believe that the servant that sought after Rebekah was the same servant Abraham chose to be his heir. When God said no to that plan, Abraham and Sarah continued to scheme, but again, they failed to talk to God first. This is when Abraham and Sarah introduce Hagar and ultimately Ishmael into the picture. As you remember, Abraham and Sarah made quite a mess here, but God was gracious and through it all, Abraham learned to trust in God and God's promises, and to rely on God's promises rather than his own ability to further the will of God. In his journey with God, Abraham has learned that God has a plan and that God will be at work in the world to fulfill God's promise. We see Abraham's maturity of faith in today's lesson when he is face with yet another crisis in the on going saga of seeing God's promise to fruition, but this time Abraham does not take matters in his own hands, and he does not worry about the outcome, he simply places it in God's capable hands and trusts that God will bring about what God has promised.

I think each generation has it's own crises of faith. Today we wring our hands over declining numbers, Biblical illiteracy and the peace and purity of the church. These are important issues facing our church. These are issues worthy of our time and energy and most of all our prayers. But as we seek to secure the faith of the next generation, we must remember first that God's promises are sure. God has promised that a time will come when God's will will be know on earth as it is in heaven. God has promised that a time will come when all will know God's reign. God has promise a peace and unity that will surpass all boundaries. If we remember these promises, if we trust these promises, then we can truly seek to discern God's will, not worrying about the outcome, but trusting that where ever God leads us, God's promises will be fulfilled. I think, perhaps, that the Lord's Prayer, when earnestly prayed, is one of the most difficult prayers, and one of the most faithful.

...Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, (thy will not my will)...

When Abraham sent his servant out to find a wife for Isaac, Abraham secured the faith for the next generation. He did so not simply be securing a womb with the right lineage, but by seeking first God's guidance. This, too, is how we will secure the faith for our next generation. This is how the next generation is already seeking to be faithful to God's claim on their lives. I have seen the next generation. This new generation does not look like the last one, none ever do, but I have seen their own willingness to be lead by God, and in this I put my trust.