

Covenant Word

Let Me Water the Camels Also

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Romans 7:15-25a;
Matthew 11:16-19, 28-30

John Philips bundled up and ran down to the church. He knew exactly what to do, and he would not let his sister down. He stoked the furnace until it glowed with heat. Thinking about the tongue lashing he might receive from their father if the church was cold when the guests arrived, he added more fuel to the flame. If the choice had been yours, what would you choose to do? As John Philips started to leave, he chose that to be doubly sure that no one would be disappointed in him, he added another load into the furnace. And for good measure, another... then, he ran back home.

It wasn't long before there was a knock on the Jackson's front door. "Brother Jackson, come quick, the church is on fire!" And before anything could be done, the pews, the piano, the white sheets, the collected flowers, the roof and the walls all went up in flames. Brother Jackson pulled his devastated daughter to the side and said, "You have a choice. We can postpone the wedding, or I can call in a favor to the Methodist minister. What do you want to do?" If it had been your choice, what would you choose? Headstrong and determined but forgiving and creative, Sophie said, "Well, we

*A Message by
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Pastor
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He had done it hundreds of time. Like all pastor's children, he had inherited some odd jobs around the church so that his father didn't have to be worried with them. So, John Philips Jackson, my father's youngest brother, was put in charge of going down to the church early every Sunday morning to bring the furnace to life so that everyone attending services would be warm in the white clapboard Baptist church building in Pineapple, Alabama.

When John Philips' sister, a Judson graduate named Sophie, announced her engagement to an officer in the U.S. Army, one William Garrett, The Pineapple Baptist Church received the news enthusiastically. The women of the church gave Sunday afternoon teas, gifts accumulated in the Jackson's parlor, and the week of the wedding, the church ladies bleached, starched and ironed their flat white sheets with which to decorate the church. It was their custom to hang the sheets on the walls of the sanctuary so that everything was fresh and clean as was befitting the holy ceremony for which they planned to gather. Some had been protecting any little thing that would grow in their yards and gardens so that flowers and vines and greenery were carefully placed in the sanctuary for decoration. Ohhhh, everything had to be just right for Brother Jackson's daughter's wedding.

The selected day in February arrived. It was cold and gray. Even though the wedding was at two in the afternoon, excitement had the Jackson family up early. Brother Jackson took his youngest son aside. "John Philips, your sister is getting married today, but it's cold outside. The church will be cold if you don't get down there and make sure that the furnace is up and going. We don't want anyone to come to the church for this wedding and find that it is not properly heated. So you get down there and do your job."

If the choice had been yours, what would you choose to do?

will just have to get married in the Methodist church." And so they did.

Today's Old Testament story tells yet another wedding story. To catch the humor of this story, you have to listen with a tongue-in-cheek attitude that reminds us that in the humor lies a hope that God is ever working to bring the divine promise to fruition no matter how limited and bungling we happen to be. (Joel Kaminsky, "Humor and the Theology of Hope: Isaac as a Humorous Figure," Interpretation, October 2000) With the main character's name meaning "laughter," his wedding story is more available to the narrator to include many points of subtle Hebrew humor. And for us, well, let's just say that this story could have been Freud's favorite example of a classic Oedipus complex! You see, after mother Sarah dies, her son, Isaac, cannot recover from his grief. Father Abraham, therefore, decides that what will distract his son from his bereavement is to bring him a bride. So Abraham sends his servant to the ancestral homeland to seek a proper wife in order that the promise will continue to have a future.

The servant pulls up to the local watering hole with camels that are thirsty after a long trip. Not having any guidelines from Abraham for the

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for
wanting to read and
study these thoughts
more carefully.
Please know that I do
not take full credit for
anything that may be
contained within,
because I may have
read or heard
something at some
point during my
pilgrimage and do not
remember its source
and thus, cannot give
the rightful author
his/her credit. I pray
that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.**



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selection of Isaac's bride, the servant is left with the quandary of how he will make his choice. He decides that God will show him the right girl by her hospitality. Please note, there are no interruptions by God in this story. No magical, spectacular oddities...just steady discernment and a readiness to trust whatever surfaces in the course of daily life. It is a world-view that believes there are no parts of our lives in which God's purposes will be hidden. (Walter Brueggemann, Genesis, pg. 201)

So the servant decides that when he asks for a drink of water, the "right" candidate will say, "Oh, yes, and let me also water your camels." And so he takes his time watching the lovely women go about their daily tasks. I would imagine it was fairly enjoyable checking out the local beauties, sizing them up and wondering about the wealth of their families. Seeing Rebekah, he is so pleased with what he observes that he asks her, "May I have a drink?" And her reply? "Oh yes, and let me water your camels also!"

Now we are dealing with a patriarchal system here. It is one in which it would be unthinkable for a woman to seek a husband OR that would encourage a bridal selection based on intellect. There are some clues in the text however that speak to Rebekah's industrious nature. The verbs give it away: she goes to the spring; she fills her jar; she comes up; she lowers her jar; she gives the servant a drink before quickly emptying the rest in the animal trough; then she runs to the well again to draw water for the camels. The servant is smitten. He reaches into his saddle bags and presents her with a gold ring and two bracelets...both of which are described by their weight to emphasize the intentions and importance of this

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encounter.

She runs to tell her mother's household. We wonder about the whereabouts of her father's household, especially since it is Rebekah's brother, Laban (important to know for the rest of the family saga), who negotiates the deal with Abraham's servant. But before finalizing the engagement, we see a most unusual thing happen. Laban approaches his sister and asks if she is willing to be Isaac's wife. She is given the option of choosing, of saying "yes" or "no." If given the choice, what would you choose?

When Rebekah agrees to go, the family gathers around her to give her a farewell blessing and a wedding blessing.

It is the first time in scripture that a blessing is pronounced by a family over a woman, and readers of scripture will have to wait until Ruth 4 to hear another blessing pronounced over a woman. (William Holladay, The Christian Century, June 19, 1996) They offer: "May you, our sister, be the mother of thousands of ten thousands and may your descendants gain possession of the gates of their foes."

Then Rebekah mounts her camel and travels to meet

her husband. As the caravan approaches the camp, she spies a young man in the fields. With the humor of a ten year old, the narrator says that it just so happens that Rebekah catches Isaac at a personal moment of basic physical necessity. When she asks who it is, she is so shocked to hear that it is Isaac, her betrothed, that she falls off her camel. She wraps a scarf about her head to disguise her identity. Either she has no desire to humiliate him or she is so embarrassed over falling off her camel, that she veils herself. Isaac greets her and takes her into his mother's tent!

How the Hebrews would have laughed over this story with Isaac bearing the joke's brunt. They would have fallen prey to the thought that many a true word is spoken in jest, for while they would have laughed at Isaac, they would also have their belief confirmed that God often fulfills divine plans by making a mockery of human activity to fulfill divine expectations.

It is human expectations that has Jesus so frustrated in the gospel lesson. The people could not be satisfied. John the Baptist did not eat or drink, and the crowds accused him of being demon possessed. Then Jesus came along, and they accused him of being a drunkard and a glutton, a friend to tax collectors and sinners. He compares them to children playing in the market. "We invited you to play funeral with us, and you chose not to wail!" "We invited you to the wedding feast, and you chose not to dance!" If given the choice, what would you choose?

It was sad really, for God's kingdom was breaking out all around them, and they couldn't see it. They could not be satisfied by it. The funny thing is, even with their skepticism, the celebration of the Kingdom kept on erupting: children and youth traveled to Passport Camps; Camp BCOG went off without a hitch; Arts Camp was planned for; Terra Nova Academy received training and laughter; Cuba will be encouraged; the fellowship hall is being renovated; the beach retreat is being offered; deacons are praying; music is being sung so that souls are lifted; and forthright conversations to bring about justice are happening around the tables in our classrooms and beyond. God's Kingdom is breaking out all around us and

we get to choose if we will dance or be a wall flower; if we will walk in commitment or remain on the periphery; if we will be so burdened by how we think God ought to act in this world or give in to the joy of Jesus who reminds us: "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." It's almost as if we are Rebekah being asked for a drink of water. Do we hand over a cup or are we all-in saying "May I water your camels also?" The choice is yours. What will you choose?

My friends, the choice is yours: are you coming to the party or not? Are you participating in the kingdom or not? Are you enjoying the freedom of joy of Jesus Christ or not?

When David turned 7, we decided to have a big bash to celebrate. The children in the neighborhood and all the children in his class at school were invited. If I do say so myself, it was a great party! Circus themed, we had a peanut toss to elephants and a high wire act. You could have your picture made by putting your face through a lion's open mouth. Aunt Mary Helen was a fortune teller, and for a small contribution to summer missions, the clown ministries team from Samford University came. This was no party, this was a production!

As the fun began, we noticed the boy from next door. John was peeking over the fence. I went and Lloyd went to say, "Come on in, John. Come be a part of the fun!" But John wasn't moving. Off and on, we would wave and motion for him to come, but he wasn't coming. In the words of Jesus, we piped, but he would not dance. In the words of the Old Testament, we offered to give him a cup of water AND to water all his camels, but he wasn't having any of it. That fence (and whatever it symbolically represents for you) was as close as John was coming. It held him up so he could see just enough of what he was missing and protecting him when he would duck down.

My friends, the choice is yours: are you coming to the party or not? Are you participating in the kingdom or not? Are you enjoying the freedom of joy of Jesus Christ or not?

Paul says: "I choose to do the very things I hate." Why don't we make a different choice? Today, choose differently. Choose the love of Christ as we stand and sing hymn #816, "If Thou but Trust in God to Guide."