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Hudson UMC
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The Buffoon

Prayer for Enlightenment

O Lord, we pray, speak in this place, in the calming of our minds and in the longing of our hearts, by the words of my lips and in the thoughts that we form. Speak, O Lord, for your servants listen. Amen.

Remember the movie "Sleepless in Seattle?"

It's a story of romance - a romance that didn't begin over Facebook or the internet - but over the radio.

Young Jonah was wasn't just dealing with his mother's death, but his father's depression. He wants Dad to find someone, but he also wants to approve of his potential new Mom. Jonah calls a national radio show and spills his dad's story all over the country.

One listener to the show, Annie, not only gets drawn in, but also becomes Jonah's woman-of-choice for his Dad.

So Jonah arranges a meet-and-greet between his father, Sam, and Annie on Valentine's Day at the top of the Empire State Building.

The only problem is, Sam had no intention of going to New York City to meet someone he had never met, and who in all likelihood, might be a lunatic...at least that is what he thinks. Besides, he had other plans for the weekend.

That is, he HAD other plans, until 8-year-old Noah boarded a plane in Seattle bound for New York City. Sam had to go chasing after him.

There's that moment when Sam and Annie see each other on the top of the Empire State Building, and it all comes together. As if it were written in the stars. It wasn't the first time they'd seen each other before, but this was the clincher.

They looked at each other, and they KNEW.

I think the story of the coming together of Isaac and Rebekah is similar in a few ways. Just without all the romance and stars.

Isaac's mother had died.

Isaac's father was old and dying. Abraham had been a wanderer.

But, Isaac - the one called “laughter” - well, he wasn't allowed to wander.

Maybe because Abraham worried about him a little too much.

Whatever the reason, Isaac needed a wife, because Abraham needed offspring...that is, Abraham needed grandchildren.

Several chapters earlier, God promised Abraham three things:

1. Land
2. Blessing, that is wealth
3. And, descendants. Not just a few descendants, God had promised that Abraham's offspring would outnumber the stars in the sky and the sand in the desert. So Isaac needed to get busy.

But, Abraham didn't trust Isaac to find the right woman. Abraham was concerned that Isaac might marry from among the Canaanites...and those would be the wrong kind of descendants. Abraham wanted Isaac to marry someone from his homeland.

So Abraham sends his personal servant back to the homeland to find the right woman.

But first he has his servant swear an oath. Abraham is near death, his greatest wish is that Isaac be married to someone from his clan, as was the custom. The servant is reluctant to take the oath. What if he finds the perfect woman and she refuses to return with him to marry Isaac? What happens then?, the servant asks. Am I still bound by this oath? What happens then?

Don't worry, replies Abraham. God will go before you and you will find a wife for Isaac. However, if she refuses to return with you, you are released from this oath. With this, the unnamed servant vows to find a wife for Isaac.

The servant devises a test to determine the right woman. He will go to the local well and ask for a drink of water...the test has 2-parts. The right woman will offer him a drink and then offer to water his camels.

This is no small offer.

Thirsty camels can drink up to 30-gallons of water in 10-minutes. The servant has 10 camels...that is 300 gallons of water.

So the right woman had to be really special.

She had to like drawing up lots of water for thirsty camels.

The bar was set high.

As the servant finished making his bargain with God, Rebekah came out to the well for water. She was beautiful.

The servant ran to meet her and ask for a drink. She gives him a drink and then offers to water his camels.

In the reading today, we pick up the story as it is being retold by the servant to Rebekah's family. The events originally unfolded a few verses earlier in chapter 24. The servant is amazed at how quickly God has answered his challenge.

Verse 21 has the servant gazing at Rebekah "in wonder and silence" as she waters his camel with gallons and gallons of water...I think he had plenty of time to wonder.

This word we translate as "wonder" suggests more than pausing silently as he watched Rebekah. This wonder suggests more of a sense of being stunned, to have come everything come crashing down. And the 'silence' is not a peaceful consideration, but the speechless silence that comes from confusion.

In other words, he is at a loss for words.

When she completes the camel-watering the servant gives her the gifts and THEN asks her name and lineage. He had been so shocked, that he broke protocol and forgot to ask her name.

Rebekah gives her name and family and offers to take him home to her family.

Upon their arrival, the family prepares food and drink for the servant and his entourage. Hospitality is the custom of the time. Those same customs presume the servant and his men will eat and drink with the family to prove that they come in peace and not war.

But before he will eat or drink with the family, the servant insists on telling the full purpose of his errand. This is where we join in the story with our reading for the day. He ends his lengthy story by saying – in effect, if you are not clever enough to see the hand of God in these affairs, I will gladly take my gifts (including all my gold and jewels) somewhere else, to those who CAN see God's hand in these affairs.

Rebekah's brother, Laban CAN see God working, although he seems to see God more in the gold and jewels than in the camel-watering.

Whatever the case, Laban and Rebekah and the family assent to the marriage and urge the servant to take her home to Isaac.

What follows is a lengthy negotiation for the bride price with Laban. These are then followed by even more negotiations to determine how quickly they will return to Rebekah's newly betrothed.

Finally, when all the negotiations are completed, the servant and Rebekah journey back to the Land of Canaan to meet her beloved.

English translations obscure what happens next.

When Rebekah is making her way into town, Isaac is off in the field...doing something.

It's hard to tell exactly what it is, most translations say either "meditating" or "walking" or

something, then footnote that this is a guess (there's a surprising amount of scholarly controversy over this).

I talked with one Hebrew scholar about this. He too noted the controversy here. He commented that one Hebrew scholar even wonders if Isaac was off in the field urinating. That would explain why Rebekah covers her face with her veil...

Perhaps the surprise is that Isaac seems to be wandering in the field aimlessly or meditatively. Why is he not supervising the shepherds? Why is he not checking the flocks? Why is he not overseeing his servants? Isaac is not young, he is 40-years-old. Seems to me that he should be DOING something other than wandering about in the fields at sunset.

I am sure that we will never know definitively what Isaac was doing, but he was doing something in the field and Rebekah sees him.

Then she asks the question.
The question we all know she'd ask.
The question that she knew the answer to before she even opened her mouth.
"Who is the man over there?"

"Oh, him? That's Isaac. Your soon-to-be-husband."

Her only response is to cover her face with her veil.

Unlike *Sleepless in Seattle*, this is no encounter atop a storied art-deco masterpiece on the Day of Love. This is a scene out of a sit-com.

The old dying widower Abraham worries that the God who produced a child of promise to 90-year-old Sarah and 100-year-old Abraham cannot continue the line and the promise. Abraham decides that God needs some help.

So Abraham sends a servant who worries that he will make the wrong choice on his divine mission. The servant makes an outrageous bargain with God. Let the right one offer water to me...and my camels!

Upon returning home, Rebekah sees Isaac out in the field doing nothing...or something and covers her face.

Isaac, remember his name means "laughter" is the cause of much laughter in this story.

But this is more than just an irreverent take on a Bible story.

I don't know about you, but my life is much more Genesis 24 than Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan in *Sleepless in Seattle*. Don't get me wrong, I've been able to conjure up suave-and-sophisticated a

few times in my life...but also I've had my fair-share of painfully awkward situations.

Do you remember the scene in the movie "Dirty Dancing" when Baby gets to talk to Johnny for the first time. She has been admiring him from afar. Now they are face-to-face. Her heart is throbbing as he asks her how she gained admittance to the staff party. She gulps and the best thing she can come up with is: "I carried a watermelon."

I have been there.
I have made a fool out of myself.
Like Isaac, like Baby...I've been there.

This Isaac and Rebekah story is a scene from a sit-com.

And, despite the laughter - despite the hijinks – of this Isaac and Rebekah story, we must not lose sight of the fact that God DOES prosper Isaac, and through him a great family and nation are born.

The story of Isaac and Rebekah tells me that God can use worriers and dunder-heads.
A clown like me...someone who is anxious like me.
Great things can come of a buffoon.
Great things can come from a worrier.

Because, in the end, it's not Isaac or Abraham or Rebekah or the servant or me or you or worriers or dunderheads who do the great thing or the blessing...but it's God.

It's GOD working through Isaac and Abraham and Rebekah and the servant and you and me and us.
And, that's the point of it all.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.