

July 9, 2017
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“God in the Details

The Reverend Amy Starr Redwine



“Bidden or unbidden, God is present.”

~Erasmus

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Genesis 24:34–38, 42–49, 58–67

34 So he said, 'I am Abraham's servant.³⁵The 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.³⁶And Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master when she was old; and he has given him all that he has.³⁷My 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;³⁸but 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!⁴³I 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,'⁴⁴and 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."⁴⁵'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."⁴⁶She 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.⁴⁷Then 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.⁴⁸Then I bowed my head and worshipped 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.⁴⁹Now 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.'⁵⁹So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his men.⁶⁰And 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.'⁶¹Then 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, and was settled in the Negeb.⁶³Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field; and looking up, he saw camels coming.⁶⁴And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel,⁶⁵and 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.⁶⁶And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done.⁶⁷Then 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.

Philippians 4:4–7

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

“God in the Details”
Genesis 24:34–38, 42–49, 58–67; Philippians 4:4–7

Two groups of people go to Haiti to build a medical clinic. One is a group of concerned citizens, brought together by an awareness of their first-world privilege and a longing to make life better for others. The other group is from a church which has sensed God calling them to love God by serving those in need. Both groups use the best building materials. Both plan wisely and know what they are doing. Twenty years later, which medical clinic is still standing?

It should not be news to any of us that, today more than ever, we as a church and as individual Christians are in a position of having to justify our perspective. We believe that there is a great and unseen power – whom we call God – that created the world and that infuses the world with life and love, justice and mercy. We believe in the historical person of Jesus, who lived in a particular time and place and who, while fully human, was also fully divine in some way we can neither prove nor fully explain. We believe that Jesus’ way of being in the world got him tortured and killed, but also that in Jesus’ resurrection, God shows that life is stronger than death and love is stronger than hate. We believe that God invites us to follow Jesus by revealing, as best we can in our daily lives, the breadth and depth of God’s love for every person. We believe that God is present and that our prayers matter. On our best days, we can articulate these beliefs and even act in ways that manifest them. But proving definitively that these beliefs affect and undergird the most mundane details of our daily lives? That is a little harder.

Rob Bell is a Christian writer, preacher and theologian. The title of his most recent book is a question: *What is the Bible?* In it, Bell offers some suggestions about how to approach and understand this book that is widely owned, less widely read and often abused. According to Bell, the best question to ask of any passage in the Bible is, “Why did people find this important to write down?” This is a crucial question because it reminds us that the Bible was indeed written by people – just like us – who were struggling to articulate their beliefs and understanding about God.¹ And so, just as we pick and choose which story to tell the friend who calls and says, “tell me what’s going on with

¹ Rob Bell, *What Is the Bible?: How an Ancient Library of Poems, Letters, and Stories Can Transform the Way You Think and Feel about Everything*. HarperOne, 2017.

you,” these ancient writers made choices about what stories to tell. Rob Bell’s recommended question is a good one for today’s passage, which can feel more than a little superfluous.

To understand this story, we have to go back to the beginning of the story of Abraham. Abraham’s story begins with the simple fact that he and Sarah are unable to have children. So when God promises Abraham that he will be the father of multitudes and the leader of a great nation, and calls him to leave his homeland and his kindred in pursuit of that promise, Abraham’s decision to believe that promise reveals either his naiveté or his deep faith.

The stories we have heard in the last couple of weeks show just how precarious that promise was for the first generation – after all, it is long after the original promise and after some pretty harrowing experiences that Sarah finally has Isaac. Then Isaac survives to adulthood at a time when this was no guarantee. Which brings us to today’s story. If Isaac doesn’t have children, the story ends here. And for Isaac to have children, he needs a wife.

If you’ve read Margaret Atwood’s classic dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, or if you’ve watched the recent television adaptation, then you have a window into the level of collective anxiety that arises in a society when the existence of the next generation is threatened. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is the story of a world where environmental and biological factors have led to widespread infertility. And the resulting fear for the future of humanity leads to a horrific system designed to capitalize on the few women left who can bear children.

Today’s story of Rebekah matters because without the next generation, God’s promise to Abraham cannot be fulfilled. So although this story might seem to have little to do with faith or even with God, it is faith in God’s promise that provides its foundation. And although it might at first seem to have little in common with the life that many of us lead, it begs us to look past the cultural dissonances to find relevance to us today.

As the preacher Lillian Daniel says, “We don’t read scripture because it’s interesting. We read scripture so that in the middle of our own real lives, scripture can read us...The Bible is not a book about people who lived thousands of years ago, it is about us.”² One of the promises of our faith is that

² Rev. Dr. Lillian Daniel, “The Stand-in Church,” Day1.org, July 24, 2011. http://day1.org/3040-the_standin_church

there is nothing that happens to us that God doesn't care about. And if we are actually going to believe and claim this promise, then we need stories like this where we see people – people not so different from us – finding the presence of God in the details of their lives. We need the servant who prays for God's guidance before meeting Rebekah, and who offers prayers of thanksgiving after. We need Rebekah's family who offers her the choice of whether to go with him. We need Rebekah herself who, much like Abraham, chooses to say yes to the invitation she has been given, an invitation that requires her to leave her homeland and her kindred and go with a stranger to an unknown land and an unknown future.

Not long ago the preacher Tom Long was interviewed about his accomplished career as a preacher and preaching professor. Here is what he had to say, "What the Christian faith does is allow us to see where God is already at work in the world. And then there is a hospitable invitation to join into that. When I think about what we might say to a younger generation about faith, the first thing we probably should do is *apologize* to them for domesticating it so severely, because *faith is a whitewater adventure*. And faith is the place where life gets really **deep** and really **risky** and **full of adventure**..."³

Today's story is not just an invitation to Rebekah. *It is an invitation to you and to me*. An invitation to a faith that is deep and risky and full of adventure. An invitation to adopt a perspective that acknowledges that God is present in all the details of our lives and our world, God is present in our search for meaningful relationships, God is present as we study for exams or stay up late to work or get up in the middle of the night to care for the baby, God is present as we worry about our growing children or our aging parents. God is present as we grow old ourselves or face illness. God is present. In all things. Do we have eyes to see it?

The apostle Paul first had to lose his sight in order to fully recognize the **power** and **presence** of God in order to accept the invitation to a deep and risky faith. When Paul encountered the risen Christ on the Damascus road he was blinded by the encounter. Once he could see again he could see not only physically but also *spiritually*. And Paul's spiritual sight affords him the

³ http://day1.org/7822-day1_honors_the_rev_dr_thomas_g_long

knowledge that God's presence and love is stronger than any hardship we might face, which is why he can say to the church in Philippi, "Rejoice in the Lord always...do not worry about anything, but in prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

Paul does not say this lightly – after all, his faith in Jesus leads him to be jailed, persecuted, cast out – for Paul, the negative consequences of a life of faith are very real. In fact, these very words are written while Paul is in prison, knowing that he may soon be killed for clinging to his faith. The consequences for us seem much less dire. After all, does it really matter if we say a prayer before making a major life decision? Wouldn't Rebekah have showed up that day at the well whether Abraham's servant asked for God's help or not?

Two medical clinics are built in Haiti, one by a non-profit, and one by a church. Twenty years later, which one is still standing? The answer, barring defective supplies or human error, is that *they both are*. The clinic that the Christians build isn't any different than the one built by the non-profit. *The difference isn't the clinic*. It's the *perspective* of those who built it, it's a way of looking at the world that doesn't minimize or deny the challenges we all face, but that sees God's presence in the midst of it.

A few days after he was killed, John Lennon's widow Yoko Ono requested that his fans around the world observe 10 minutes of silence in his memory. Vertamae Grosvenor was in New York City that day, but NOT because of John Lennon. She remembers: "Because my Sixties was sit-ins, not love-ins; because it was not Monkees and Beatles, but Panthers and Young Lords; because my song was *We Shall Overcome*, not *I Want to Hold Your Hand*, I felt it would be a bit hypocritical for me to go to Central Park and light a candle for John Lennon. BUT because I believe that John Lennon was a righteous brother, *I wanted to do something*. So I met with several of my friends for brunch about 1:30. **Nobody announced 2 o'clock--but when it came...we knew**. A remarkable thing happened. The café became **absolutely silent**. The café became *magic*, for ten minutes. *Magic*. The magic transcended generations and culture and color and politics. Former flower children, ex-black militants, old longhaired Marxists, young shorthaired ad execs, shallow barflies, deep intellectuals...all came together in grief and fell silent. *I swear I heard Aretha*

singing "Peace, Be Still." Most had their heads bowed. A few had tears. **None** was embarrassed. I had the feeling that people *prayed* for John Lennon's soul. And for their own. I know I did."⁴

If we choose, we can look for God's presence in any – and every – circumstance. Our faith proclaims that in the midst of the suffering, the economic distress, the threat of nuclear war, the latest epidemic, the racial injustice, the illness, the birth, death, the joyful celebration of every kind, ***God is there***. We are not alone to wrestle with and figure out the answers to seemingly intractable problems. Instead, like Abraham's servant, we are called to see God at work in the details and to acknowledge God's presence through prayers of joy and petition and gratitude. And like Rebekah, we are invited to leave behind all that's familiar to join in God's work – to embark on this whitewater adventure of faith – together.

Amen.

⁴ From *Listening to America*, edited by Linda Wertheimer, 1995.