

“Match Made in Heaven”

I think it’s great that the 4th of July fell on a Friday this year, making for a nice, long holiday weekend. I love the 4th of July. Every year we watch *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. I have a broadly eclectic assortment of patriotic music on my iPod. I enjoy hot dogs and fireworks and such. I have flag socks and a Declaration of Independence tie. I get cranky about other people’s tacky patriotic displays, but cut myself quite a bit of slack. I think Independence Day is all about celebrating values: freedom, equality, dignity, self-determination and our noble but imperfect attempts to embody these in forms of government. It’s a lot like the church: when we lose sight of the distance between our ideals and our institutions we’re in trouble.

This time of year is also about picnics and family get-togethers that span generations. These are occasions when we create memories and share family lore, such as stories about how our matriarchs and patriarchs got together. A few years back we Ruhes hosted the 60th Wedding Anniversary celebration for Priscilla’s parents; and I remember looking around the room and thinking that this vast, assembled multitude owed its existence to the odd circumstances that brought those two together. How strange to think of all that was at stake in such a socially scripted, hormonally charged encounter!

What do we call this? Is it luck, chance, fortune, the hand of God? I think of Humphrey Bogart’s classic line in *Casablanca*: “Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine.” What if she had gone next door? It’s something to think about.¹

Maybe that’s why Genesis devotes an entire chapter—and a long one, at that—to the story of how Isaac and Rebekah got together.

At first glance it’s full of comedic possibility. A servant is sent on the errand of finding a relative who will marry Isaac, the forty-year-old virgin: “We gots ta git us a kin woman fer Bubba!” Angie suggested *Froggie Went a-Courtin’* for the middle hymn. There’s plenty here that’s funny. But actually it’s no funnier than many of the real stories we know about how life partners find one another. And the tale as we have it in Genesis is told very tenderly.

Last week we read of a crisis initiated directly by God, who called upon Abraham to sacrifice his only son and heir to the divine promise, Isaac. This week we find Abraham taking the initiative, with God apparently receding into the background. But the stakes continue to be high.

The LORD, Yahweh, “has blessed Abraham in all things.” Abraham has a grown son, Isaac—and yes, he is forty years old. Abraham has lived to a ripe old age, 140. He has flocks and herds and a vast entourage of servants and shirt-tail relatives. He is

¹ Yes, I realize that in the movie they do not get together and produce a family; but Bogart’s line about chance encounters is too good to pass up.

wealthy in all the ways wealth is measured. But still the future is uncertain because Isaac does not have a wife. Abraham is acutely aware of this because his own wife, Isaac's mother Sarah, has recently died.

At issue is the three-fold promise of God that Abraham will be the father of a great nation, that he will possess the promised land of Canaan, and that through Abraham all the families of earth will come to know God and be blessed. We are reminded how fragile the promise is; how it must be renewed and passed along in each generation. The real threat here is not that there will be no wife at all for Isaac, but that he will marry someone who will not worship Yahweh. If Isaac were to marry a Canaanite, whose religious devotion would not be exclusive to the God of Abraham, the promise could be lost in just this one generation. Or so it seems to the patriarch.

So Abraham calls to him his most trusted servant, whose name is never mentioned in the story,² and makes him swear “by the LORD, the God of heaven and earth” to return to Abraham's earlier country, Haran, and to find there a suitable wife among the worshippers of Yahweh; in other words, to find a distant cousin for Isaac to marry. This vow is solemnized as the servant holds Abraham's thigh and makes the promise. Bibles were not yet available for oath-swearing.

The servant sees the flaw in the plan right away: What if he finds a suitable woman but she doesn't want to come? In that case, Abraham says, the servant will be released from his oath. But Abraham also tells the servant that God “will send [an] angel before you.” The servant is on a mission from God.

But he also leaves as little as possible to chance. For wooing purposes he assembles an impressive procession: a ten camel motorcade, a security force of servants and bags full of bling: bright, shiny objects like rings and bracelets made of precious metals and designed to attract and hold the attention of prospective brides and their suspicious relations. The servant is prepared to make an impression: Yo! Servant of Abraham here!

The servant reminds me of the old Russian proverb, “Pray to God but row for shore.” He does everything he can, but he frames his enterprise in prayer. He has the sense that his mission has a holy purpose. When he arrives in Haran he heads for the local watering hole—some things never change. But as he prepares to survey the scene he prays for a sign—that the woman he asks for a drink who also offers to water his camels will be the one.

He doesn't wait long. Rebekah comes with a jar on her shoulder. We're told right away—although the servant doesn't yet know—that she is the granddaughter of Abraham's brother Nahor, making her some obscure relation to Isaac that some of you can calculate but I can't. She's strong, good-looking and eligible. And her manners are impeccable. “Drink, my lord,” she says to the servant in response to his request. “I will draw for your camels also, until they have finished drinking.” Bingo! I don't know how much water ten camels can drink, but I'll bet it's a lot. Back and forth she goes from the well to the trough. Rebekah probably walks a mile for the camels.

² It is possible that the name is Eliezer; see 15:2.

This is too good to be true, so the servant makes with the bling right away: a half-shekel ring for her nose and two ten-shekel gold bracelets for her arms. Then he asks the key question: “Tell me whose daughter you are. Is there room in your father’s house for us to spend the night?” The *Holiday Inn Express* doesn’t allow camels.

She tells him who she is and accedes to his request, and the servant erupts in a prayer of blessing: “Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master. As for me, the LORD has led me on the way to the house of my master’s kin.” So all the elements are in place, but the servant still has to close the deal.

Rebekah’s brother Laban becomes the most prominent relative in the ensuing discussions, rather than her father Bethuel. It’s rather comical how Laban responds to the nose-ring and the bracelets and how impressed he is with the ten camels. “Come in, O blessed of the LORD,” he says to Abraham’s servant. “Why do you stand outside when I have prepared the house and a place for the camels?” The camels get straw and fodder (love me, love my camel), water is brought for the washing of the feet of the guests and a feast of hospitality is prepared.

But the servant is all business. He isn’t about to set his big first impression adrift in an ocean of small talk. “I will not eat until I have told my errand.” Excuse me. We’re on a mission from God. Laban bids him, “Speak on.”

And he tells the story, the whole thing. In fact this is where we come in with our lesson for today, overhearing the servant’s account of all that has transpired. There is passion in his voice, but also calculation. He begins with the part about how they share worship of the LORD Yahweh and how Abraham is impressively rich: “The LORD has greatly blessed my master, and he has become wealthy; [God] has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys.” This is a serious conversation, and Rebekah and her family need to know with whom they’re dealing.

The servant goes on to recount the oath he swore to Abraham and the prayer he prayed at the watering hole. He recounts his prayer of thanks to God for having found Rebekah: “Then I bowed my head and worshipped 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.”

Laban and Bethuel respond, “The thing comes from the LORD; we cannot speak to you anything bad or good.” This is God’s doing; who are we to get in the way? They give their consent.

But Rebekah has to give her consent, as well. Laban and Bethuel suggest that the servant hang around for ten days or so to give the idea a good chance to soak in. But the servant is insistent, and wants to put the matter to Rebekah right away. Her father and brother ask her, “Will you go with this man?” She responds, “I will.”

Her response is reminiscent of Abraham’s response to God some sixty-five years earlier. She embraces an unknown future, “going out not knowing,” in response to what they all take to be a calling from God. So Rebekah and her nurse (in anticipation of her giving birth to children) join the procession that returns to Abraham.

As they approach where the clan is now camped in the Negeb, the first person they encounter, appropriately, is Isaac. Rebekah veils herself in modesty. The servant refers to Isaac as “my master,” signifying the passage of authority from Abraham to his son. Isaac and Rebekah are married. And the text says that he loved her. That’s nothing to take for granted, but it is the happiest of happy endings. Abraham will die at peace.

As is true in so many of our own stories, the sub-plot of God’s providence is clearest in hindsight. Human machinations are in the forefront of this story, as they seem to be in our own lives; and considerations of religion and finances and alternative futures all come into play. But God is also here throughout, particularly in the way in which the servant approaches his important responsibility. He understands how crucial it is for him to get things right; and that means he should be prayerful as well as careful, faithful as well as bold. He approaches his charge not with overwhelming fear of failure, but with hope that the future somehow belongs to God, and with a determination to be an agent of that future. This doesn’t make him some sort of pious, goody-goody Ned Flanders cardboard cutout. To the contrary: he’s engagingly clever and charming. He isn’t manipulative, but very forthright about his purposes and what he wants, trusting that if this deal is made it will be because it is truly in the best interests of everyone. And so it proves to be. God’s presence and activity are not apart from the things we do, but in and through them. Never is this more evident than in relationships.

We have the idea that finding the right life partner is a purely personal matter; that our individual fulfillment is the highest good at stake; that personal happiness is the greatest goal of true love. But a passage like this dares to suggest to us that a higher purpose can be at work in our relationships; that in finding a love that allows us to be our deepest, truest selves, we can also be of greater service to the world; that loving relationships are not simply ends in themselves, but vehicles through which we are strengthened, nurtured and challenged for the living of faithful lives. And families are not just about shaping citizens and consumers, but nurturing the next generation to become, in the words of the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith, “servants in the service of the whole human family.” In that sense it just may be for all of us that the ideal match is a match made in heaven. Camels are optional.

Amen

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