

First Presbyterian Church
Greenfield, Indiana
Pastor John J. Paulson
July 3, 2011 3rd Sunday After Pentecost

Wedding Bells Ring!

Genesis 24: 34 - 67	A wife for Isaac
Psalms 45: 10 – 17	The princess and the King.
Matthew 11:16 – 19 , 25 – 30	Jesus promises rest.
Romans 7: 15 – 25	Help me follow God's law!

Informally before the sermon: Finding a wife in America today is a bit more difficult than it was for Isaac in his day. For most of us, at least, nobody sends a servant on a cross-country trip to the town we were born in to find one for us. No, like most things we do in America, we are free to search for one ourselves. And, like most things we are free to do, it takes time and effort.

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer! Amen

You remember Isaac. The last time we saw him he was walking back down the mountain with his father after almost being sacrificed on the wood pile. Well, several years have gone by, and his father Abraham thinks it is time for him to be married and start a family. After all, descendants as numerous as the stars have to start with the children of Isaac and his wife.

Abraham and Sarah are settled in the land of Canaan, surrounded by Canaanite people who don't know Abraham's God. Except for his nephew Lot, the rest of Abraham's relatives have remained in the territory surrounding the town of Nahor where Abraham and Sarah moved from.

The Canaanites are not Godly people. These are tribes of people who worship and sacrifice on altars to a god they have named Ba'al, who they thought was in charge of the agricultural cycle. If it rained when the crops needed it, Ba'al was happy; if there was a drought, Ba'al was mad. Sometimes they had to sacrifice humans to try to make Ba'al happy. This worship was not compatible with the worship of the true God, the God we worship and the God Abraham worshipped, and Abraham wanted to be certain that his son Isaac's family would be worshippers of the one true God.

He knew that his God was the only God and that God demanded loyalty. Through their early history, the Israelites, as Abraham's descendants were to be known, would get

themselves into trouble by trying to blend Ba'al worship and the worship of God together. It didn't work. Well before the ten commandments were given by God, Abraham knew that God expected complete loyalty. The First Commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me", would not have surprised him one bit.

The only way to insure that Isaac's wife would not be influenced by the Canaanites, was to make certain that she was also a follower of Abraham's God. That meant Isaac's wife had to come from the region that Abraham's relatives still lived and worshipped in.

Abraham thought that if he sent Isaac back to find a wife, Isaac might well decide to stay there where living conditions were more comfortable and settled. Abraham accepted God's gift of the "promised land", and knew that God wanted Isaac to start his family in the territory that God promised to Abraham and his descendants.

So, his trusted servant was called and sent on the mission to return to Abraham's home land and find Isaac a wife. In those days a dowry was expected from the family of the groom, and the servant took ten camels, with as Genesis describes it, all kinds of good things from his master. The dowry was not a gift in the true sense of the word; it was to make up for the loss of the family's daughter as a source of household help and an income provider.

When he reached the town where Abraham's family had come from, "he had the camels kneel down near the well outside the town; it was toward evening, the time the women go out to draw water. Then he prayed, "O LORD, God of my master Abraham, give me success today, and show kindness to my master Abraham.

See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. May it be that when I say to a girl, 'Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,' and she says, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels too'--let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master." Before he had finished praying, Rebekah came out with her jar on her shoulder. She was the daughter of Bethuel son of Milcah, who was the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor".¹

¹ Genesis 24: 11 – 5 (NIV)

God listened, and it happened exactly as he had prayed for. Rebekah came with her jar, gave him water and watered the camels as well. She took him home to her family and they all, including Rebekah, accepted Abraham's offer and off they went back to Canaan. Rebekah's nurse went with her on the trip.

Isaac was out in the fields when the travelers approached and when Rebekah saw him from a distance, she got off her camel, pulled her veil over her face, and, after the servant had told Isaac what had happened, Rebekah ran to him and they were married.

You may wonder why the veil? Well, supposedly in marriages arranged by the parents of the bride and groom, there is no possibility that the groom will balk and back out if he does not like the way the bride looks. It is too late.

Sometimes even today when I perform a wedding ceremony, the bride remains veiled until I pronounce them "man and wife" and tell the groom that he may kiss his bride. The veil is lifted and they kiss.

This is a wonderful story about our ancestors; none of the trickery that we will see later. No violent takeover of territory. No disobeying God and doing what they think is best. In this story we see God's people acting the way God wants them to act as they behave the way God wants them to behave.

During Vacation Bible School this week we had several Bible stories that taught the kids, and us, about God and our responsibilities. Each day had a theme revolving around an animal and a special word that described the animal's behavior and taught about what God expected from us.

Day one was a Zebra and the command that we trust God. Day two brought a Red Colubus Monkey and an understanding of what it means to love God and love each other. On day three we met Ellie the Elephant and learned about paying attention to God's teachings. And, on day four, our special word was "care" and we talked about how Meerkats care for each others; we also saw the story of the Good Samaritan acted out with Rachel being the victim.

We talked about trusting God, which Abraham did; we learned about caring for others, which the servant did when he brought the dowry and brought Rebekah safely back to Isaac. We taught the kids a message about following God and Jesus and doing the right things; traits we found in all the characters in today's story. And we talked about

loving God and loving others. Speaking of love, remember the way the story of Isaac and Rebekah's wedding ends: Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and he loved her.

Did they live happily ever after? Well, the rest of the story isn't the script for a Disney princess movie.

Our story doesn't say anything about a reception after the wedding, but we will have one this morning. Jesus invites us to this table in a few minutes, to join with Christians of all times and all places in celebrating God's wonderful gift of eternal life. We are all welcome at the Lord's table. I'll see you there in a bit.

AMEN