

In the Tent

7/9/2023

Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Preaching on:
Genesis 24

The 24th chapter of Genesis, which we just read selections from, is often referred to as “The Marriage of Isaac and Rebekah.” This chapter is 67 verses long and the actual “marriage” only happens at the very end, in the 67th verse. The other 66 verses tell the story of everything that had to happen before the marriage—before Isaac and Rebekah went into the tent together, joined with one another, loved and comforted one another.

And what has to happen before a one-verse union? 66 verses of hoping, longing, searching, negotiating, consenting, and journeying—always journeying into the unknown. First Abraham had to desire to find a wife for his son, Isaac, from back in the land of his birth. It would have been much easier to simply find a wife for Isaac in the place where they were living. But Abraham longed for something more.

He made his servant swear to him to accomplish his dream. And Abraham’s servant had to make a long and difficult journey with a nearly impossible task—to convince the family of some young woman

that they should send her far away to the home of a man who left long ago to marry (sight unseen) this man's son. It would have perhaps been easier to at least bring Isaac along for the trip to court the young lady, but the servant leaves him at home and instead brings gifts, and his words, and his unwavering loyalty—everything he has—and asks this family to use their imaginations and to take a flying leap of faith—into the unknown.

And, finally, Rebekah herself then had to consent to the journey—but it was much more than that, of course. This incredible journey required more than a simple nod of the head; it required a person who could say YES to the unknown with every fiber of her being without even a delay of a single day, without even a single hour to consider it. She had to already be prepared, to already be filled with hope and faith, with confidence, and with a desire to become more, in order to be ready to answer such a call. Her heart was filled with a longing for love and a trust in God that allowed her to say yes to this journey before she was even asked.

All of this preparation had to happen in the 66 verses before Isaac and Rebekah could finally enjoy one another's company, before they could join with one another in physical and spiritual union, in marriage, in the tent. Now, perhaps, after all this buildup, perhaps, you found that when we finally get to the actual "marriage" it's a little anticlimactic. One verse in the tent? That's all we get? I get it, But, come on, let's give these kids a little privacy, OK? This isn't a romance novel. It's not *50 Shades of Gray*, for goodness sakes. It's the Holy Bible. All kidding aside, it is interesting that after 66 long verses full of the desire and the willingness to embrace the unknown, that when the marriage actually happens, it happens in a tent with the flaps closed and we are the ones who are now asked to use our imaginations, we are the ones left to imagine a beautiful, powerful unknown—a Mystery.

Now I don't know if the story of the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah is pure history, or pure myth, or a little bit of both, but what I am certain of is that it is written in a way that is meant to spiritually inspire and instruct us. This story leaves us a little unsatisfied. It leaves us wanting to peek inside the tent, to see what's going on in there that was worth all that trouble.

Because the story is given to us in a way that it is about more than Isaac and Rebekah, it's about our spiritual longing, our desire to seek God in the unknown, journeying far and wide, preparing ourselves, and saying YES to our lives and our callings with every fiber of our beings, all leading us to a tent of our own—a place or a moment where we connect intimately and soulfully with God, a moment perhaps in which we realize that God is in us and we are in God—the great paradox of human being: that we are majestic, miraculous individuals who can only become complete when we join with the infinity of God; that we are all the universal Breath who can only become fully realized when we know ourselves through the One who breathes each breath.

The irony in all this is that we are a people who understand and live out the first 66 verses, but we do not often allow ourselves the joy of the 67th verse. We do allow ourselves the experience of that union,

that holy presence of God.

We're the kind of church that attracts seekers, right? Now there's nothing wrong with being a seeker. In fact, our scripture reading this morning makes it very clear—whatever else you are, you must be a seeker, a longer, a journeyer. Many of us are seekers (certainly this is a part of my story) because we have come to feel dissatisfied by the absolute certainty of the dogmas of the faith.

There's no absolute certainty in our scripture reading this morning. No one breaks out a scroll and says, "Look, it's written right here, you must go. So, go. It's a no-brainer." There's faith. There's hope. There's longing. But no absolute certainty of the nitty-gritty details of how or even if everything is going to work out. In fact, let's face it, if everyone in this story were absolutely certain, rather than making these big romantic gestures, and taking these enormous risks, it would be a boring story. Because stories of people who are absolutely certain are only edifying to people who are absolutely certain, but people who are absolutely certain don't need edifying stories, because they're already absolutely certain. In our realization that there is no absolute certainty to faith we become (like Abraham, like his servant, like Rebekah) seekers.

So, we realize that certainty is less spiritually mature than hope, than longing, than seeking. That's good. We're on the right path. But the mistake we often make nowadays is to come to believe that uncertainty is somehow the goal. So, we seek and seek and seek, for 66 verses, and for 66 verses more. We journey and we journey and we journey, and we don't remember that the goal is the marriage—the tent. Imagine if after all that, after Rebekah finally put on the veil and went out to Isaac that Isaac didn't take her into the tent and take off the veil. Imagine if they just all got back on their camels and started seeking all over again. Oftentimes that's us. We miss the 67th verse.

The goal of all our seeking is something REAL. Uncertainty is the path, not the goal. Maybe we never learned of the promise of the Mystery in that tent. Maybe we haven't realized and understood this paradox: that the capital-M Mystery which must always remain Unknown to the parts of us that desire certainty, can be known through an experience that cannot be explained. It can only be experienced in the tent; it cannot ultimately be seen from the outside. Your journey is a journey to the tent. You must enter it yourself. You must experience it yourself.

This realization—that our escape from certainty is meant to eventually lead us to an experience of the Mystery of God—is a big one. It's a shift of spiritual consciousness. And for those of us who have spent time (maybe years, maybe decades) uncertain about God, it makes God real again. And one of the most basic Sunday school lessons a child can receive prepares us for the growth: that it is not just we who long for God, it is God, first and foremost who longs for us. It is not just our longing for God that gets us to the tent. It is the fact that God has prepared that tent for us, and God has sent the servant out on the journey for us because God longs for us first.

So beloved, where do you meet God? Where is your tent? Is it prayer? Is it meditation? Is it worship? Is it down at the beach? Is it in service to others? Is it in studying, reading, exercising, yoga, gardening? Beloved, it could be anywhere, but it's got to be somewhere. You've got to be headed somewhere. Maybe you don't know exactly how you're going to get there, but the tent is real because God is real. Yeah. We long to be something more and God longs to be that something more for us. And as we navigate the 66 verses of our lives filled with hope and faith and seeking, let us remember that the ultimate goal is not perpetual uncertainty, but a profound union, a profound experience of the presence of God.

We long to be something more. And God longs to be that for us. As we navigate the 66 verses of our lives, filled with hope, faith, and seeking, let us remember that the ultimate goal is not perpetual uncertainty but a profound union, a profound experience of the presence of God. Let us enter the tent of our own spiritual encounters, where the Mystery unfolds, and where we discover our truest nature, meaning, and purpose.