

REBEKAH
Genesis 25:19-28

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on July 19, 2020, the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. The church was closed for the Coronavirus pandemic and the sermon was preached to an empty sanctuary for livestreaming.

These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Last week, I concluded my sermon with an incident I witnessed as part of my service on the Board of the Faith and Politics Institute. On a pilgrimage to Jackson, Mississippi in 2014, I had seen Representative John Lewis and Mylie Evers-Williams in a tearful reunion on the carport next to the driveway of the home in which Medgar Evers had been killed in 1963.

Friday night I went to bed late and caught an announcement on my phone of his not-unexpected death. I was up for the next several hours.

We were privileged at Westminster to host John Lewis as a speaker at Desert and Dialogue in 2017. I did not know him personally, but working on the board of an organization he had founded and in which he remained active, I experienced him as humble and accessible in person as he was significant in the history of our nation. God has been good to us all in sharing John Lewis with us for eighty years, in using him to help us strive for our highest ideals. Later in this service, we will remember him in prayer.

Prayer: Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts lead us toward those highest ideals with which you have inspired us. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

I.

In last week's sermon, we were introduced to the character of Rebekah, a young woman who lives in the village of Paddan-aram. Because of the lavishness of her hospitality to a servant of Abraham who is on a mission to find a wife for Abraham's son Isaac, the servant determines happily that Rebekah is the most likely candidate.¹

- Rebekah's family supports her desire to accept the offer from the servant, giving her an unusually high degree of choice for a woman in her culture.²
- Rebekah agrees not only to the marriage, but to its immediacy.

¹ Genesis 24:10-27.

² Genesis 24:28-61.

- Isaac and Rebekah marry.³
- The narrator tells us that Isaac “loves” Rebekah,⁴ the first time such a statement has ever been made in the Scriptures.⁵
- Isaac takes Rebekah into the darkened tent of his late mother Sarah who has died some years earlier, and Rebekah’s energy, zest, joy fill the tent with light and life and – for the first time in years – bring “comfort”⁶ to the quiet and meditative Isaac.⁷

Rebekah is a heroic and energetic figure whose light not only fills Sarah’s tent, but radiates from the pages of scripture as we initially encounter her.

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But like so many people who marry, in marrying into the family of Abraham and Sarah, Rebekah takes on all the blessings and burdens of that family – particularly as these have shaped and formed Isaac into the person he has become by the time she links her life and destiny with his.

There is bane and blessing, weal and woe, that have marked Isaac’s experiences with his family:

- The call to his parents Abraham and Sarah – at age 75⁸ and 65 respectively – to leave home and hearth and undertake a journey to a land whose identify God would reveal when they arrived in it
- Their long effort to produce an heir so they might fulfill God’s call that they become a great nation⁹
- The oldest child and rival heir to Isaac named Ishmael who had been born to Sarah’s maid Hagar when Sarah had desperately doubted her own ability to conceive and had given Hagar to Abraham for that very purpose.¹⁰
- The time when as a teenager Isaac nearly lost his life as his father came very close to sacrificing him on an altar with knife and fire, until a ram appeared in the wilderness and the voice of God commanded Abraham not to offer his son.¹¹
- The marital separation that followed thereafter as the narrator seems to indicate Isaac’s parents never spoke to one another nor lived together after this near sacrifice¹²
- And finally Sarah’s death and funeral, the latter to which Isaac appears not to have been invited by his father.¹³

³ Genesis 24:67.

⁴ Genesis 24:67.

⁵ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* (New York: Schocken Books, 2009), 237.

⁶ Genesis 24:67.

⁷ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995) 139.

⁸ Genesis 12: 4 specifies Abraham as 75 at the time of their call; and Genesis 17:17 specifies Abraham as 100 and Sarah as 90.

⁹ Genesis 12:10-20 form part of this background and frustration, as do Genesis 17:15-22 and 18:9-15 and 20.

¹⁰ Genesis 16 and 21:8-21.

¹¹ Genesis 22:1-19.

¹² Genesis 22:24 specifies that after the near sacrifice, Abraham went to and lived at Beer-sheba; and Genesis 23:1 Sarah died (and appears to live) at Hebron, thirty miles away. Abraham and Sarah are never recorded as speaking to one another following the near sacrifice.

¹³ In Genesis 23:17-20, Abraham appears to take care of the burial arrangements for Sarah alone; by contrast, when Abraham dies in Genesis 25:7-11, both Isaac and Ishmael reunite to bury him.

Whenever I meet with couples who are planning to marry, I try to impress upon them is that when we marry, while we create a new family and a new entity, we also in a sense “marry” everything the other person has experienced in his or her life. That can sometimes be a great burden and challenge: “in plenty and in want; In joy and in sorrow; In sickness and in health.”¹⁴ A tall order, rarely simple.

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Despite the joy of entering her marriage, it is not apparent that Rebekah necessarily wants children, or at least wants them yet, as it is Isaac and only Isaac who prays for her to conceive.¹⁵ Yet Rebekah undoubtedly knows that producing an heir is one of the reasons Isaac marries her, so that his family role in God’s promise of descendants and nationhood can be fulfilled in his generation.

It turns out that like her mother-in-law Sarah, Rebekah is barren, yet eventually she conceives. Her pregnancy becomes difficult, not because of reasons of health, but for the fate of the twin sons within her.

- The narrator puts it this way: “*The children struggled within her.*”
- The struggle becomes so intense it leads Rebekah to question the value of her own life and future: ‘*If it is to be this way, why do I live?*’ she asks.

But Rebekah doesn’t voice her cry into thin air or self-denigration. Instead, the narrator tells us: “*She [goes] to inquire of the Lord.*”

Just as the narrator has told us that Isaac is the first person in Scripture to *love* another human being, Rebekah is the first person in scripture to *question* the value of her life, but like Jeremiah,¹⁶ Jonah,¹⁷ Job,¹⁸ all of whom will follow her in Scripture, Rebekah questions her life – voices her complaint and lament – in the context of her relationship with God.

So she goes and inquires of the Lord.”

Enough said.

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The Lord gives Rebekah an answer, but as is often the case, the answer is not the one she was hoping to hear:

*Two nations are in your womb [God says],
and two peoples born of you shall be divided...*

Then God adds:

*...one shall be stronger than the other,
the elder shall serve the younger.’*

¹⁴ This language comes from the marriage service in the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* in 1928 and was imported into the *Book of Common Worship* of the Presbyterian Church in 1946.

¹⁵ Genesis 25:21.

¹⁶ Jeremiah 20:18.

¹⁷ Jonah 4:3.

¹⁸ Job 3, especially verses 1 and 11, and 10:18-19.

God is telling Rebekah that not only will she give birth to twins who will be in *perpetual conflict* – nothing any parent wants to hear – but God is also telling her that her two sons will exemplify God’s intention to reverse the normal course of affairs in which *the elder receives the inheritance and bears the family promise*. Rather, in God’s new way of doing things, “*the elder shall [now] serve the younger.*” This reversal will play itself out not only among her sons Jacob and Esau but also with Joseph and his brothers, David and his brothers. This reversal will come to even fuller fruition centuries later when Christ will proclaim: “*The last shall be first and the first last.*”¹⁹ It is Rebekah whose role and burden it is to give birth to this dramatic reversal in human history.

II.

When I taught Rebekah in a class a few weeks ago, someone who was married to a Rebekah piped up and said: “Rebekah was given a mission, she accepted it, it was hard, but she fulfilled it. Therefore, I think she is a hero.” Not a bad assessment.

But there is an additional aspect of Rebekah’s life worth noting, perhaps the source of her heroism. It has to do with Rebekah having an *interior* life, a *subjective* life, a *spiritual* life, deep within herself.

A wonderful Biblical scholar named Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg deserves the credit for pointing that out, at least to me.²⁰

When Rebekah –in her despair over her pregnancy – *goes to inquire of the Lord*, she achieves another Biblical *first*: She becomes the first person in scripture to seek God out before being sought by God.²¹ Noah hadn’t sought God out. Abraham hadn’t. Sarah hadn’t. Rebekah is the first person to seek God on his or her own. As such she becomes more than a body to bear a child; she becomes an “I” who resides within that body, a person, a subject, a soul seeking God. In seeking God from the deepest recess of her interior life she is a model for us.

III.

Though I normally don’t preach Old Testament characters in ways that leap directly to the New Testament, I want to do that today mainly through portions of a sermon that columnist David Brooks preached to empty pews – seem familiar? – at the National Cathedral on July 5th of this year.

Brooks, who is Jewish but eclectic in his own faith and spirituality, exhibits in his sermon a wise understanding of the conflictive and factionalized context into which Jesus was born – not unlike our own today.

But Brooks sees Jesus as one who has *an enormously rich interior life* out of which he *acts* and *draws courage* and *identity*. In that regard, I believe Jesus follows in the footsteps of his foremother Rebekah as he followed in the footsteps of John the Baptist as well.

Follow me along as I share some of what Brooks says:

- [The world into which Jesus was born] is nothing like the peacefulness of an American church pew.
- It’s nothing like the quiet domesticity of a modern Bible study.

¹⁹ Matthew 20:16.

²⁰ Zornberg, see especially “Her Own Foreigner,” Chapter 7, in *Murmuring*, and “Vertigo—The Residue of the Akidah” in *Beginnings*.

²¹ Zornberg, *Murmuring* 215.

- It was a world of strife, combat and fractious intensity.
- The Holy Land [was] then, and it is now...a spiritual and a literal battleground.
- The primary factor was foreign occupation, Jews and Jewish Homeland had been oppressed and occupied for centuries: the Babylonians, the Syrians, the Romans...
- Everything was loud.
- Everything was pressure packed.
- Words and hatreds clashed by day and night.

When you see Jesus in this context [Brooks says], you see how completely *bold* and *aggressive* he was.

- He lived in a crowded angry world yet took on all comers.
- He faced stoning in Nazareth.
- He offended the rich of Capernaum.
- John the Baptist was beheaded for leading a ministry and Jesus walked in his footsteps.
- He entered Jerusalem at a time of power jostling between Roman and Jewish elites...a complex network of negotiated and renegotiated power settlements between various factions.
- [Yet Jesus] pierced through [these power factions] and went right to the core.
- At a moment of elite polarization, he was bringing access to the kingdom directly to the poor.
- He was offering triumph directly to the downtrodden.
- He fit in with none of these factions and plowed through them all.

Brooks displays his greatest admiration for Jesus when discussing the Beatitudes, which he labels “astounding.”

- In the midst of conflict, here was *another way, another path, a higher serenity*.
- [The Beatitudes] were an inversion of values.
- They were beauty in the storm....
- [They were] no mere formulas for superior ethics, but tidings of sacred and Supreme [reality entering] the world.
- Jesus was love and beauty in the midst of muck and violence and the most difficult circumstances imaginable.

Brooks concludes:

...You can be atheist, Jewish, Muslim, whatever, and you can be astounded by this man and astounded by the faith he inspired. When you see him in this context, you see the *beauty* is more powerful when it's in the middle of the storm. It's beauty in the storm....What keeps faith alive during storms like now are the awareness of beauty, the essential goodness at the ground of our being.

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When we first meet Rebekah, we are attracted to her as a beautiful young woman full of light and life. As we follow her, all she goes through, all she faces, she leads us to *cry out*, but cry out *to the Lord*.

What keeps faith alive during storms like hers, like ours, like now, is the *awareness of beauty*, “the essential goodness at the ground of being,”

- No matter how *fearful* we are
- No matter how *discouraged* we are
- No matter how *angry* we are
- No matter how *uncertain* we are
- No matter how *tired* we are
- No matter how *alone* we are

Awareness of beauty, awareness of essential goodness at the ground of our being – is faith.

So Rebekah went to inquire of the Lord.

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