

Don't Try This At Home  
Genesis 24:34-67  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
May 21, 2006  
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*Introduction to the scripture:* "Our first Scripture reading this morning is Genesis 24:34-49. This is the middle of a story that begins in verse one of chapter 24. Here's what has happened so far in the chapter: Abraham senses that his own time is coming to an end, and he is concerned for the future of his son, Isaac. He calls his oldest and most trusted servant to his side and gives him a task: he asks this man to go back to Abraham's hometown and secure a bride for Isaac. The first part of chapter 24 tells us what happens when the servant arrives in town. Here in verse 34, the servant is telling the story himself to the men that he has met in Abraham's hometown, Laban and Bethuel. Listen for God's word as we pick up the story.

Read first lesson (Genesis 24:34-49).

Read second lesson (Genesis 24:50-67)

This is a great story. So great, in fact, that it gets told twice, essentially, in chapter 24 of Genesis. People like the story of how Abraham went about securing a wife for his son. It's a beautiful story. And because we like it, because it's great, and because it's beautiful, we can be tempted to see it in the wrong light. Let me point out two things that this story is *not* about.

This story is *not* about the wonders of human love. When we hear it, we may be tempted to over-sentimentalize the account of Isaac and Rebekah's marriage. Can you see how a Harlequin Romance novelist might treat this story? Images of a ruggedly handsome Isaac at work in the fields, waiting for the servant to come home. As the sun is setting one day, the old man comes across the horizon, leading a camel, on which sits the most beautiful girl in the land. Their eyes meet...a chill runs down his spine. He knows – *he knows!* - that this is the girl for him. The old servant shares the miraculous story of how they met...the music comes up...Rebeka's hair is tossed gently in the breeze as she dismounts. She smiles...Isaac smiles...Abraham walks up, smiling...the music comes up, the sun goes down, and we know that love is a many-splendored thing.

Listen: that may be how it happened when Beebe and Stel met, or when you met your beloved, but that's not what this story is about. This is not an account of how wonderful it is to be in love.

The other danger that I want to point out here is that this is not an encouragement for us to think of crazy ways to figure out God's will for our lives. The first time I read this story, I was struck by the servant's prayer as he rolls into town: "Look, God, I'm not trying to tell you your business, but I really need a wife for Isaac. How's about the first girl who comes out and not only offers me a drink, but also offers to water the camels. That would be great, God. Thanks." Immediately I had this notion of all the times I'd prayed prayers that sounded like that. You know, "Lord, if you really want me to take this job, then please make the interviewer be wearing a striped tie," or "Lord, if I'm supposed to talk to the stranger across the way, then please let the first bird I see today be a cardinal."

Have you ever thought like that? Asking God for some sort of crazy sign as a confirmation of something that you think maybe out to happen? That's not what's going on here. This is not a story about a servant who is trying some crazy testing out on God. In fact, what's happening here is essentially a prayer for a friendly greeting and for hospitality. He's asking God to guide him in a way that would be culturally expected and appropriate – he wants to meet someone who is open, warm,

and generous. Now, if the servant's prayer was "Lord, let the woman I meet greet me by singing 'Take Me Out to the Ball Game' while wearing bunny slippers and doing the fox-trot", that would be remarkable. But he's praying for someone who is kind and available. So don't try this at home: don't ask God to lead you by sending someone to water your camels.

So what do we get from this story? What can the people of God take home from this beautiful account of Isaac and Rebekah's meeting?

For starters, I want you to remember all the way back in September, when we started to read through Genesis. Way back there in the garden of Eden, we read a promise from God: God said that the story of human history would be one of conflict between the descendant of the serpent – that is, Satan, or the evil one – and the descendant of the woman. Do you remember that we talked about how Jesus was the ultimate descendant of the woman who defeated Satan in his resurrection victory? So with that in mind, I asked you to read through Genesis, and through the entire Bible, thinking that a significant part of the story was keeping the descendants of the woman alive until God was ready to make good on this promise. So we read about Noah, for instance, not only as a miraculous escape for this man and for his family, but as an account of how God was keeping the descendants of Eve alive in spite of the brokenness in the world.

So Genesis 12-24 is about how Abraham hears God's word and enters into a covenant with God. Great! It's also about how God is going to use Abraham and his family to preserve the hope that started back in chapter 3. And with this in mind, then the servant's trip is not a romantic little interlude, but rather an account of how God is acting in history to secure a future for the descendants of Eve so that there will be children of the promise. Do you see? Genesis 24 is about God providing an heir for Abraham and for Isaac – it's about God acting faithfully by leading his people to a point where they will have what they need to respond appropriately to his promises.

Another thing that I'd like to point out in this passage is the notion that God's leading is revealed in the ordinary lives of his people. We've touched on this briefly already, but the truth is that there are no spectacular fireworks that accompany God's guidance here. It's clear that the author of Genesis believes, and wants us to believe, that God's hand is leading the servant to bring Rebekah home as a bride for Isaac. It's clear that the writer of this book believes that God's people are following his lead here. But look at how that lead is given and how it is followed: in the course of daily life! There's not some incredible parting of the heavens as Rebekah comes out. There is no big split between the sacredness of God's calling and the drabness or secularity of ordinary life.

God's intentions are accomplished in Genesis 24. How? Through a visit to a neighbor's home. By the sharing of a meal. In the giving and receiving of gifts. As stories are told and heard.

One of the temptations that we often face is thinking that Monday through Saturday we're on our own, and Sunday we'd better impress God. The truth that rings through page after page of scripture is that there's no such false division in our life. We are able to follow God into the world through daily acts of obedience as we simply pay attention to where and when God is at work.

And that points me to the third lesson that I take from this passage. People are clearly led by God into God's best for them. But look: the folks who are led are the ones who are most willing to be led. There is deep faith here – the faith of Abraham, of his servant, of Rebekah, and others. But that faith comes as a result of listening to God and being willing to trust that God is willing and ready to meet them. And note, too, that there is a profound level of interconnectedness between those in the passage who are led by God.

Abraham wants a wife for Isaac, but he is unable to make the trip, so he asks his servant to go. The servant is not crazy about accepting that kind of responsibility, but he does; he trusts Abraham

and he tells his story to Rebekah and, later, to Laban and Bethuel. Rebekah doesn't smack the servant when he comes out with this crazy story about God's will – she listens to him and checks it against the other things that God has done and is doing in her life. Laban and Bethuel are impressed with the bling that the servant unloads, but at the end of the day, they trust Rebekah to make her own decision as she listens to God. And when she goes with the servant, she does not go alone, but rather with members of her community and family alongside of her.

Genesis 24. What is it about? It is about God providing an heir and keeping his promises. It is about people who seek God in their regular events of their regular lives – people who are willing to walk with God 24/7. And it's about people who recognize that most often, God leads us in the midst of our community of faith.

Are you like Isaac, or Rebekah, or Abraham's servant? Do you long for God's leading in your life? Have you come to a crossroads and been uncertain, maybe even crying out loud, "What next, Lord? Where should I go? Send me a sign!"?

Where should you go to college?

Which job is right for you?

Who is the person you're supposed to marry?

What should you do about that old house?

Is it time for you to move?

These are the questions that people like us have every day.

Do you trust that God is leading you? That the universe in which we live is not random or chaotic, but rather orchestrated and characterized by love and grace?

Will you look for God's direction in the midst of your daily life? I'm all for you showing up in church and asking the big questions then – really, I am. But will you walk through the daily parts of your day and lift them to the Lord as well. Will you pray as you read through your mail, seek to honor God as you shop for groceries, try to love your neighbors the way that God has loved you? My sense is that the real shaping in our lives comes during these unguarded moments when we think that we're just being ourselves.

Can you remember that God speaks through others in your community? Before I came here as pastor, I wondered what in the world I was supposed to be doing. I was not comfortable in my church in New York, but didn't have a sense as to where I ought to be. I talked about it with a friend, who said, "Dave, I know you don't like to preach, but I think you ought to be looking for a place where you have to preach every week. I think it would be good for you and good for the Church." I want to say that I didn't believe that the first time I heard it, but it was because a friend made that comment to me that I began to ask God where he wanted me next, and I allowed God to include churches like Crafton Heights on that list.

In our culture, we're pretty independent. We don't like to trust people with our inner thoughts or our hopes and dreams. We like to think that, pretty much, it's all up to us. So when we are looking for God's direction, we think that maybe if we just knew the right passage of scripture or could figure out the magic code, then we'd know what we were supposed to do. And then we announce that to our friends and family: this is what I'm going to do, and this is why...

But that's not how it works in scripture. Page after page features God's people approaching each other and saying, "Hey, can you help me figure this one out?" People who walk up to each other and say, "Have you ever thought that God might want you to try such-and-such?"

When Virgle asked me for a title to this sermon to put in the bulletin, I chose "don't try this at home" because I was going to say that we shouldn't put little tests out there in front of God the way that Abraham's servant did: you know, driving around the parking lot and saying, "God, if you want me to get a new car, then let the next open space I see be next to a brand new Honda Prius." Or maybe, "God, if you want me to ask her out on a date, then let her wear a red sweater today." Trust me, you shouldn't try that at home.

But as I thought about the message from scripture, I got a different kind of meaning for that phrase. As an independent, self-sufficient, my-own-boss kind of American, I think that I'm perfectly able to figure out God's will for my life. And the Bible is loud and clear: don't try that at home. Come and spend time with God's people. Bring the hungers, the desires, the fears, the hopes of your heart to the people of God. And together, listen for what God is doing in the world. And see how you fit into that. Amen.