

ISAAC AND REBEKAH

Genesis 24:62-67

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on July 9, 2017, the Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a preaching theme for multiple Sundays entitled "In the Beginning."

Now Isaac had come from Beer-lahai-roi, and was settled in the Negeb. Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field; and looking up, he saw camels coming. And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, and said to the servant, "Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us?" The servant said, "It is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

Prayer: Gracious God, we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from your mouth. Make us hungry for this heavenly food, that it may nourish us today in the ways of eternal life; through Jesus Christ, the bread of heaven. Amen.

I.

On Thursday night I was reading a play by Tennessee Williams, when I came across a line spoken by a character named Carol, a thirty-ish woman who lives in a dying Southern town marked by addiction, racism, and a hard-scrabble existence for nearly all its inhabitants. Carol asks:

What on earth
Can you do on this earth
But catch at
Whatever comes near you,
With both your hands,
Until your fingers are broken?¹

Her question struck me as one that could have arisen out of the early life of Isaac, one of the people we know from the Book of Genesis. From the time Isaac is born to Abraham and Sarah until the time nearly forty years later he marries Rebekah, we see Isaac experience nothing but *trauma* and *loss*. Isaac's is a life that requires him to "catch at" many things that come "near" him, some, until his "fingers are broken."

- Isaac's birth was always in question, a twenty-five year struggle on the part of Abraham and Sarah to conceive, leaving them, respectively, a hundred years old and ninety when he was born.²
- Prior to his birth, in an attempt to produce an heir, at Sarah's suggestion Abraham had fathered a son named Ishmael by Sarah's servant Hagar. Hagar and Ishmael lived in the family compound with Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. Around Isaac's fifth birthday, he is playing in the field with Ishmael when he senses harsh words exchanged between his parents. The next morning he watches his father send Hagar and Ishmael away into the wilderness, an act which does not lessen the tension between his

¹ Tennessee Williams, *Orpheus Descending* with *Battle of Angel: Two Plays by Tennessee Williams* (New York: New Directions Books, 1955), 21. The quote is found in Act I, Scene 1 of *Orpheus Descending*.

² When Abraham and Sarah are called in Genesis 21:1-4, Abraham is 75 years old. When Isaac is born, Abraham is 100 (21:5) and Sarah is ninety (17:17),

parents, as there is no further conversation found in scripture between Abraham and Sarah after this incident.³

- A few years later, again early in the morning, Isaac follows his father and a handful of servants into the wilderness to offer a sacrifice to God. Isaac carries the wood while his father carries the fire and knife. When they have left the servants behind and are walking deeper into the wilderness, Isaac says: “Father, the fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham responds: “God will provide.” When they reach a certain place, Abraham removes the wood from Isaac, places it on the altar, then binds Isaac and places him on the altar. Isaac sees Abraham lift the knife and prepare to use it. Then he sees Abraham hesitate, act as if he hears a voice speaking to him, drop the knife, turn and fetch a ram caught in a thicket and sacrifice it on the altar on which Isaac has just been lying.⁴
- From that day forward, God never speaks directly to Abraham again. Abraham and Sarah take separate residences in separate villages about thirty miles apart.⁵ Isaac is aware of the divide between them.
- When Sarah dies, Abraham mourns her death and buries her, but the narrator doesn’t indicate that that Isaac is included in any rituals of mourning.⁶

What on earth
Can you do [dear Isaac],
What on earth can you do,
But catch at
Whatever comes near you [dear Isaac],
Catch with both your hands,
Until your fingers are broken?

II.

I am now going to take you on a journey away from Isaac for a few minutes, but if you will stay in the carriage, the route will bring us back.

Since my ordination in 1980, I have officiated at numerous marriages in sanctuaries and chapels, including ours. From time to time, I have to hold back tears in conducting the weddings, and I am not even the bride or groom. When I am moved at weddings, it is usually because I know some of the back-story that has led the couple to this point.

As challenging as marriage is, when two people stand in the church in which they worship, “in the presence of God and these witnesses” – those who have been most important to them over the course of their respective lives – the service itself represents a moment in time in which human love and God’s love break through the heartache and loss of the *past* to bring a moment of healing in the *present* that just might grow into a lifetime of hope into the *future*. I am moved by marriages because so often they represent a stage on the way *healing* for one or both the individuals involved.

Three weeks ago I served in a role at a wedding in which I have never before served – “stepfather of the groom.”

³ Genesis 16:1-15 and 21:1-21.

⁴ Genesis 22:1-19.

⁵ In 22:19, it says “Abraham lived at Beersheba.” When Sarah dies in 23:2, it has specified that she died “at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron.” Hebron is about thirty miles from Beersheba.

⁶ Genesis 23:1-20.

- Now the stepfather of the groom does not play a major role at a wedding, particular if that stepfather has married the mother of the groom long after the groom was grown and out of the house.
- Being stepfather of the groom is like being one of those minor leaguer baseball players who is called up to play in the majors near the end of the season, and expects to sit on the bench most of the time and only be inserted into a game when the outcome is no longer in doubt or it doesn't impact the playoff picture.

The seat on which I was sitting at this wedding was next to the mother of the groom, my wife Maggie, and as we were escorted to our seats I realized I had only *sat at* – rather than *stood conducting* – two or three other weddings in my life.

But when the sister of the groom walked down the aisle as a bridesmaid, I could barely contain my emotion, for that sister of the groom, named Hannah, when, four years ago, she was twenty four, experienced a “fog” of depression that came upon her “like little cat feet.”⁷ She lived a thousand miles away but came to live in our house, at times barely able to leave it, at times barely able to return to it. Some of you came and sat in our living room on Sunday mornings because for a while we couldn't leave her alone, and Sunday mornings were the only time when both of us had to be away to preach.

I'm not telling you anything that Hannah doesn't blog about today now, that she is out of the house and on her own, but to see her walk down the aisle – not even as *bride* but simply as *bridesmaid* – was a moment of healing I will never forget.

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As the story of Isaac continues in Genesis, we get to see Isaac experience a moment of healing as well.

Isaac has returned home from visiting at a place called Beer-lahai-roi – the place where God had rescued Ishmael and his mother Hagar,⁸ years before even Isaac was born.⁹ Beer-lahai-roi is a place to which Isaac returns periodically to remind himself that there has been a time in which God *provided*.

Back home in the Negev, Isaac goes out for the walk he takes every evening. While the English translation specifies that Isaac “walks,” the Hebrew can also mean “meditate.”¹⁰ Isaac walks alone, every evening, to recite his prayers, to meditate, to listen for God.

On this particular evening, Isaac looks up and sees several camels coming, led by one of his father's servants.

The camels come to a halt and Isaac sees a woman slip quickly from a camel and speak to the servant.

The servant whispers to the woman as well.

The woman then takes her veil, wraps it around her face, covers herself in darkness.

The servant then approaches Isaac and tells him a long story¹¹ of how Isaac's father Abraham – who is now around 140 years old – has sent him on a mission to find among their own people *not simply* a wife for Isaac,

⁷ Robert Frost, “Fog.” Available at http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/robert_frost/poems/850.

⁸ Genesis 16:14.

⁹ Genesis 21:1-7.

¹⁰ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 142.

¹¹ Essentially, the servant recounts Genesis 24:1-61.

- but *that person* whom God – not Abraham, not the servant, not even Isaac, but God – has chosen to be married to Isaac;
- *that person* God intends to bear children to Isaac so that the promise of land, descendants, and blessing – so frail at present – will go forward;
- *that person* whom God intends to restore through Isaac’s life the “hesed” or “steadfast love” of the Lord that has been hard to discern in the events of recent years in the line of Abraham and Sarah.

After hearing the lengthy story from his father’s trusted servant, including all the reasons the servant believes the woman who has alighted from the camel and veiled herself in darkness is that person God has chosen, Isaac invites the woman – still veiled in darkness – into the *tent* in which his mother Sarah had lived and likely died.

- The Hebrew word for “tent” also means “light.” When the veiled woman enters the tent with Isaac, the narrator for the first time gives *her* name in Isaac’s presence: her name is Rebekah. For the first time in years, the tent is filled with light upon Rebekah’s entrance into it.

The narrator then adds: “[Rebekah] became [Isaac’s] wife.” And then says: “And [Isaac] loved her.” This is the *first time in the Bible* it is stated that one person “loves” another person. “Isaac loved Rebekah.” Through their human love – Isaac for Rebekah, Rebekah for Isaac – God’s even greater “steadfast love” will return to the family line.

The narrator then draws this scene to a close: “So Isaac was *comforted* after his mother’s death.” When Rebekah enters the tent, restores it to light, and turns with Isaac to welcome the future, it is as if all the pieces of the past come together, all those things Isaac has broken fingers trying to catch. ¹²

III.

I know this sermon may be difficult for people who have “loved and lost” or for people who may “never... have loved at all.”¹³ And while this story does mark the first time in scripture that it is said a man “loves” a woman, we need not deduce from it that the healing of a human being, or the restoration of God’s steadfast love to a family, can only come through the “boy meets girl” story that is before us. In fact the story I shared from my own family is a healing primarily through the relationship between mother and daughter.

There are many relationships through which we receive the love of another human being that can help us heal, gives us hope, and restores to us the experience of God’s deeper steadfast love.

- Mother-son
- Father-son
- Father-daughter
- Sibling
- Friend
- Colleague
- Lover
- Foster parent-foster child
- Grandparent-grandchild

¹² Zornberg 141.

¹³ Alfred Lord Tennyson, “In Memoriam A. H. H. OBIT MDCCCXXXIII: 27.” Available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45336/in-memoriam-a-h-h-obiit-mdcccxxxiii-27>.

- Adoptive parent-adopted child
- Prisoner-correspondent from the outside
- Brother or sister in faith

I can only say that when we witness such healing in relationships – as I did in my household, as we have done through Isaac and Rebekah – or as we experience such healing through a relationship we have:

- Let us bask in it
- Let us give thanks to God for it
- Let us let it give us hope

Perhaps then,
As we still catch at
Whatever comes near us
With both our hands,
We will catch
With fewer broken fingers.

Amen.