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Preaching to Tomato Plants; or, Faith for an Unknown Future

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Psalm 145:8-14

⁸ *The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*
⁹ *The Lord is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.*
¹⁰ *All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord,
and all your faithful shall bless you.*
¹¹ *They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom,
and tell of your power,*
¹² *to make known to all people your mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.*
¹³ *Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.*
*The Lord is faithful in all his words,
and gracious in all his deeds.*
¹⁴ *The Lord upholds all who are falling,
and raises up all who are bowed down.*

Sarah was 127 years old when she died, so God knows she needed the rest. At 175 years old, Abraham had one foot in the grave himself, but not before he gave his son Isaac one last gift: a wife. Her name was Rebekah. The story would have been told aloud for years and years, to a people who would have caught its bawdiness and slapstick in ways we miss, not knowing Hebrew, and also because of the uptight way we read the Bible in general. So, after we pray, my idea is to read a little, talk a little, and see what we might find useful from this story in Genesis, chapter 24.

I am grateful for the Word, O God, showing us that folks are folks and that so little in this world changes outside the details of time and place. When the world is changing all around us, help us be flexible of heart and mind and personality. Help our faith lean into the future with no other expectation than that you are with us. Amen.

Beginning with verse 1:

Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years; and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things. Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his house, who had charge of all that he had, “Put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the

Canaanites, among whom I live, but will go to my country and to my kindred and get a wife for my son Isaac.”

Summing up the whole next part, the servant asks, *What if she won’t come with me? Should I take your son back there?* To which Abraham replies, *Absolutely not. The Lord was clear that this land right here is the land I am to possess. So if you can find a girl, you’re free from the oath. But DO NOT take my son back there.* So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master and swore to him concerning this matter.

Okay, so, nobody is actually putting their hand under anyone else’s thigh. It’s much worse than that, which is why English won’t translate it precisely. Let’s just say handshaking hadn’t been invented yet, and what was going on was *more intimate*, but also more threatening when it happened between two warriors. But remember, Abraham is 175 years old. Sooooo,

¹⁰ *Then the servant took ten of his master’s camels and departed, taking all kinds of choice gifts from his master; and he set out and went to Aram-naharaim, to the city of Nahor – in modern Syria. Nahor was Abraham’s brother. The servant made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water; it was toward evening, the time when women go out to draw water. And he said, “O Lord, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. Let the girl to whom I shall say, ‘Please offer your jar that I may drink,’ and who shall say, ‘Drink, and I will water your camels’— let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master.”*

Not to put too fine a point on it, but here we have a man, a foreigner, hiding outside a known gathering place for young women – a stalker essentially – praying a creepily specific prayer for God to help him catch the right one. *Before he had finished speaking, there was Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham’s brother, coming out with her water jar on her shoulder. The girl was very fair to look upon, a virgin, whom no man had known.* So creepy.

She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up. Then the servant ran to meet her and said, “Please let me sip a little water from your jar.” “Drink, my lord,” she said, and quickly lowered her jar upon her hand and gave him a drink. When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, “I will draw for your camels also, until they have finished drinking.” So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough and ran again to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels. Okay, seriously. I have seen camels up close. They are enormous, and a little revolting. But they are work animals. They weigh 1500 pounds and can carry 900 pounds for 25 miles a day. Want to guess how much they drink?

Did I do the math? Of course, I did. 53 gallons at a go. And the Bible says she watered ALL of them? Until they were finished? No way! That’s 530 gallons of water! One gallon of water = eight pounds. 4248 pounds of water!! *If she could carry ten gallons at a time,*

that's 428 trips to the spring and back, which at five minutes each would take 35 hours. It's comic relief! Biblical hyperbole. Teenage girl watering ten camels, Haa! Haa! (Check out [this camel video](#).)

When the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold nose-ring weighing a half shekel, and two bracelets for her arms weighing ten gold shekels, and said, "Tell me whose daughter you are. Is there room in your father's house for us to spend the night?" She said to him, "I am the daughter of Bethuel son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor." Rebekah is the great-niece of Abraham, thus Isaac's second cousin. She added, "We have plenty of straw and fodder and a place to spend the night." The man bowed his head and worshiped the Lord and said, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master. As for me, the Lord has led me on the way to the house of my master's kin."

Obviously, the servant prays A LOT! because he's the only narrator for the God of Abraham in the whole story. All of Rebekah's people are polytheists. At least they were, until they see ten camels carrying 9000 pounds of presents for the family with a marriageable daughter. *As soon as Rebekah's brother, Laban, saw the nose-ring, and the bracelets on his sister's arms, and heard the words of his sister Rebekah, he went to the man; and he said, "Come in, O blessed of the Lord. Why do you stand outside when I have prepared the house and a place for the camels?" Then food was set before him to eat; but he said, "I will not eat until I have told my errand." Laban said, "Speak on."*

And for the next sixteen verses, the food goes cold while the spotlight shines exclusively upon the servant retelling the whole story, with himself as the hero, naturally. He wraps it up in verse 49. *Now then, if you will deal loyally and truly with my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so that I may turn either to the right hand or to the left." Then Laban and Bethuel answered, "The thing comes from the Lord; we cannot speak to you anything bad or good. Look, Rebekah is before you, take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son, as the Lord has spoken."*

At this point, lots more gifts come out; and of course, there's lots of drinking and eating. And everyone goes to bed. The next morning the servant was ready to hit the road, but Rebekah's brother Laban, who we will find out soon enough was not a good guy, tried to talk him into staying longer. But the servant said, "No, we really need to get back." And Laban said, "Let's let Rebekah decide," no doubt imagining she's on his side.

Instead, she says, "Let's go." And they go, but not before her family gathered around her and blessed her, saying, *"May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes." Thousands upon thousands, that's a myriad, may your family grow and grow. Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man; thus the servant took Rebekah, and went his way. 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 fell quickly from her camel.* That's what

my favorite translation says: “When she saw Isaac, she fell right off her camel.” *She fell quickly from her 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.*

Such a great story. And I spent so much time just reading it, I hardly have any left to talk about it. Just this, then. Five minutes before the stranger and his ten camels showed up, what do you suppose the teenage girl Rebekah was thinking about? A math problem maybe? Maybe a prank she was working on for her brother? They were both conniving pranksters.

I doubt she was thinking that she was destined to be a major player in the history of her husband’s people, Israel. Rebekah was Israel’s mother. Grandmother to the twelve tribes that became the kingdom God had promised. The kingdom of her own people’s blessing. I doubt she was thinking about that, standing there with her water jar. She didn’t know her future, any more than we know ours. And it cannot be said that she was faithful to this God she had not met. We know, don’t we, that God was faithful through her. Faithful to the promise God had made and to the people to whom God had made it, including us.

God is faithful whether we are or not. I’m glad about that; you know why? Because these days, more than most days, I have absolutely no idea what I am doing. At this moment, for example, I am preaching, if you want to call it that, to my tomato plants. And before you roll your eyes, remember: you are watching me preach to my tomato plants. And we are all acting like it’s the most ordinary thing in the world to do this and call it *church*.

“*Folks can get used to anything,*” writes Toni Morrison in her novel *The Color Purple*. I hope so. That would mean it’s possible to get used to having no idea what I’m doing, to get used to not knowing what tomorrow will bring. If I’m learning anything, I’m learning I don’t know anything about the future. I can buy airplane tickets and book a hotel. I can leave my office one Thursday, and the next Tuesday I’m moving it home because of a newscast about a virus hijacking its way around the world. The joke’s on me and you, friends, if we think we know a single thing about tomorrow. And all the faith that is required is the same faith Rebekah showed, even when she didn’t know she showed it, when she said *Let’s go* – the faith to do the next thing, however crazy the next thing seems. Climbing on a camel, preaching to tomato plants, or saying our prayers. Let’s do that, in fact. Let’s pray. *For all we know, O God, there’s so much more we don’t. For the peace of not knowing, we pray. Amen.*

