

**The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller**  
**Proper 9, Year A, Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67**  
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**Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA**

## **Introduction**

- We don't often get to hear the voice of women in the Bible, and we don't hear very much today, but what we do hear is extremely important
  - Before Rebekah, who was probably about 14 years old, was sent off to be married to Isaac, her 40-year-old distant cousin whom she had never met—distant in both blood and geography—she was given the opportunity to *consent* to the marriage
  - Jews look back on this story for the justification of their law requiring the consent of the woman to what was usually an arranged marriage—for all the patriarchy of the tradition, Rebekah was given a choice and she exercised it
- Just like last week, we are staying with the unfolding story in Genesis this morning since...
  - These stories are important for us to understand as they help us, as gentile Christians, understand the larger story into which Jesus was born, grew up, and came to understand his vocation, and...
  - They are just intrinsically interesting—the authors of the Hebrew scriptures are notorious for showing God, the Jewish people, and their relationship at their best and at their worst—this story, at least as it begins, is of one of their best
    - Next week we'll see how it eventually devolves into a common theme in the Old Testament about family conflict and deception

## **Background**

- We've been following the story in Genesis from the original creation of the universe, to the creation and fall of the first humans, and then to the call of Abraham and the creation of a new people to help God do what our first parents could not or would not do
  - We saw how Abraham was called out of his country and family of birth in Mesopotamia and sent to a new land as a nomad, moving from place to place with his family and his flocks

- He grew very rich and influential, but he had an heir only very late in his life—and all of this was later understood as a test of his faith, that is, a test to make sure he relies on God and not solely on his own resources
- His biggest test, as we saw last week, was when God asked him to sacrifice his son, Isaac, the son who was to be the promised heir
- We pick up the story today, when Isaac is 40, still unmarried, and still mourning the death of his mother, Sarah
  - Abraham is naturally getting worried that Isaac doesn't have a wife of his own yet, but he is also concerned that he might be tempted to find a wife among their Canaanite neighbors—from the beginning, Jews have erected very strong boundaries around their identity and intermarriage with non-Jews has been viewed as a recurring threat to those boundaries throughout their history
  - So, Abraham calls a trusted servant and sends him off with explicit instructions, and a solemn promise to follow those instructions, to his “father's house” back in the “land between the rivers”
  - This is where our reading picks up the story...
- The servant is nervous—there's a lot riding on his success and he does not want to return to Abraham having failed in his mission...So, he prays, as we might do, for God to show him a sign
- But before we get to that, notice where he meets Rebekah—at a spring—a lot of romance for desert people begins at wells or springs—the young women would arrive to get water and the young men would be well aware of where the young women gather...
  - The servant decides that he will ask the first woman he meets for a drink, which many women would be willing to help him with, following their customs of hospitality to strangers, but then he waits to see if she will offer to water his camels also—this is Rebekah's test!
  - But there are *10* camels! Do you know how much water a camel can drink? I don't either, but I know it's a lot...and remember, she's thought to be about 14 years old at the time
- We know the rest of the story...but what we didn't read is all that happened before she gets the chance to consent
  - The servant gives her valuable gifts—what 14 year old could resist, we might wonder—and then goes to meet the family and tells them

his story and gives them lavish gifts as well—Abraham knows how to make an impression

- Her parents themselves consent to the marriage, but after they get the gifts they try to delay the servants return—initially for 10 days, but the Midrashic tradition—oral stories about the biblical stories that were handed down by the rabbis—relate that Rebekah’s father had evil intentions and that he conspired to poison the servant of Abraham and keep the gifts and his daughter
- We see, however, that the servant is wise and will not be deflected from his goal, and it seems Rebekah was aware of her father’s intentions as well and is later praised for being a righteous woman and not like her family
- She was young, but already she was very shrewd...and her family finally allow her to decide, she consents, and they give her their blessing

## Conclusion

- There is much more to this story, both in scriptures and in the Midrashic traditions, that we don’t have time to explore
  - One interesting thread has to do with the fact that when Rebekah first meets Isaac, he has just returned from Beer-lahoi-roi (which we read), but this is also the place Hagar ended up when she and her young son, Ishmael, were expelled from the family
  - There’s a related story that suggests Abraham actually looks up Hagar there and marries her after Sarah’s death
- But I want to go back to Rebekah’s consent—why should we care about consent?
  - Permitting a person to give consent is, of course, an act respect and, in some cases, also an act of love
    - It says, I respect you as a person in your own right; said differently, you are not just an extension of my will
    - It also acknowledges that, as much as I might know and love you, I may not know what is best for you—you are much more likely to know what’s best for you (though whether we would permit our 14 year-old daughter to travel by caravan to marry a 40 year-old cousin is another question!)

- Giving you the opportunity to consent also acknowledges that I may not share your values, but that I trust you in make the choice that's best for you
  - Theologically, we give persons the right to consent because God gave it us when God created us in God's image—one aspect of God's image is the ability to make choices as persons
    - We can abuse this right, of course, and many of do, and many of us would be foolish to make choices without first getting input from wiser family members and friends since we are often not protected from the consequences of our choices
  - As I mentioned, Rebekah had a choice and she exercised it boldly and wisely—she becomes a matriarch of her people and is later viewed as a prophet for how she handles the problems between her twin sons, Esau and Jacob
- The lessons for us coming from this story have to do with:
  - Following God's guidance as we make our own choices, especially as we separate from our families of origin, and
  - How well we respect the right of others to make their own choices
  - Perhaps the hardest lesson is for parents, who sometimes must watch their children make choices they may not like—when to intervene and when to let them face the consequences of their choice is not easy to discern sometimes...
- The lesson of Rebekah is that without a choice she is merely property of her father or a bargaining chip in a negotiation; with consent, she is her own person and, as a matriarch of her people, her choice changed the world