

## Biblical Romance

After the emotional roller-coaster of last week's lectionary story from Genesis, the Akedah or the Binding of Isaac, we have a much happier, less taxing story this morning. It is the first of the great romance stories in the Bible. I hope that it does not come as a surprised to any of you that there are romance stories in the Bible. We will read in a few weeks of the thwarted-then-fulfilled romance of Jacob and Rachel. There is the famous story of Ruth and Boaz. I would call the story of Mary and Joseph of Nazareth a romance, though that is hardly the focus one usually gives to that story. And, of course, there is the Song of Solomon or Song of Songs, as it is sometimes called.

While we might not consider the story of an arranged marriage to be very romantic, in the modern sense of the word, there are still plenty of elements in this morning's reading that connect with the literary idea of romance. There is an exotic setting and a camel caravan. You can almost smell the spices and see the flash of the gold, the yellow sands and green oasis, the turbans and robes, the dusky beauty of Rebekah. There is a faithful servant and a scheming brother, an old man on his death bed and a grieving, lonely son. There is a young heroine who knows her own mind and, finally, a marriage and a happy ending. If this hasn't already been adapted by one of Harlequin's stable of writers, it should be.

I chose to make our Call to Worship this morning follow a Fourth of July theme but had I used one of the Psalm readings from the lectionary, as I usually do, I probably would have constructed a responsive reading from Psalm 45, one of three options in this week's lectionary. Psalm 45 appears to have been written for the celebration of a royal wedding, so it, too, has those exotic elements of romance that we so enjoy in escapist fiction or in tales of other cultures. The king is praised as "the most handsome of men," graceful of speech, blessed by God, glorious and majestic. He is a defender of truth and the right, victorious in battle and just in government. His house is adorned with ivory and filled with music; his clothes scented with the most wonderful spices. Mid-way through the psalm, the focus turns to the bride, who, like Rebekah, has come from far away to enter into marriage: "Hear, O daughter, consider and incline your ear; forget your people and your father's house, and the king will desire your beauty... the people of Tyre will seek your favor with gifts, the richest of the people with all kinds of wealth. The princess is decked in her chamber with gold-woven robes; in many-colored robes she is led to the king; behind her the young women, her companions, follow. With joy and gladness they are led along as they enter the palace of the king." Isn't that a wonderful picture?

Another reading suggested for today in the lectionary is a brief excerpt from the aforementioned Song of Songs, chapter two, verses eight to thirteen: "The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away." Now, that's love poetry, some of the finest ever written. The book is called the Song of Songs because the Jewish editors of what became our Old Testament considered it the most beautiful of all poems. Sadly, this brief quotation is the only time that a passage from this

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remarkable book appears in the Revised Common Lectionary, which is one of the reasons I don't always follow that worship guide.

These readings may all seem very apt to us at this time of year. It is the traditional time in our society for weddings. I was called on to perform a wedding for a neighbor family just last week, our own David Scalise is getting married this upcoming Saturday and there are other weddings and anniversaries happening in our extended church family and among our friends. So this seems like a perfectly natural time to be thinking of romantic love.

Of course, some might ask why we would address such a frivolous subject in the serious milieu of a Sunday morning worship service. They might ask, "Shouldn't our minds be directed to loftier matters in this place that a story of boy-meets-girl? Should we bother with such earthly things when our proper topic is the Creator of the universe?" But I think that the story of Isaac and Rebekah and the others that I mentioned and the love poetry in Psalms and Song of Songs is in the Bible precisely to remind us that these things of everyday life are also part of the Kingdom of God. Yes, our God is the awesome, unknowable Ground of Being who demands our all in service, just as Abraham discovered. Yes, our God created heaven and earth from nothing, split the Red Sea for Israel and raised Jesus from the dead after three days in the tomb. But our God is also heard in the still, small voice and in the cry of a newborn baby; our God knows each common sparrow and each hair on our heads. Where there is love between two people, love that brings joy and hope for the future, of course God is there. Just as God's saving love for each of us is a gift, just as the self-sacrificial love of Jesus and all those who follow his example is a gift, so too is the giggly infatuation of romantic love a gift from our God who is love.

The God-given gift of romantic love blooming between two people is certainly reason enough to celebrate this story of Isaac and Rebekah but there is another kind of love that permeates this story even though it is never explicitly mentioned. That is the love that we might call friendship, a love that is not romantic but is true none the less. I think we see a wonderful example of this kind of love in the character of Abraham's servant. The man is not named in this story, although for centuries those who have read this story have assumed he is the same Eliezer of Damascus whom Abraham earlier names as his steward. You will notice on the front of your bulletin, for example, that the famous illustrator of Biblical scenes, Gustav Doré, titled his engraving of the scene at the well of Nahor, "Eliezer and Rebekah." Now, remember, until the births of Ishmael and then Isaac, Eliezer was Abraham's heir as well as his steward. Now the old man is asking Eliezer to go and find a bride for Isaac, a bride who will presumably bear Isaac children to ensure the inheritance. Had Eliezer been a different sort of man, he might have gone about his task less faithfully, perhaps returned without a bride for Isaac, saying "Sorry, boss, no luck." Then only the unmarried and childless Isaac would have stood between him and Abraham's wealth.

But Eliezer proves himself a true friend to both Abraham and Isaac. He sets about his quest with pure intentions, asking God to guide him. When it appears that God has indeed led him to the right young woman, he gives thanks and the words recorded in Genesis ring true as the heartfelt rejoicing of a loyal friend: "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." Esther Menn, the Old Testament scholar from

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Chicago's Luther School of Theology whose work I cited last week, also comments on this story and on the fact that, despite the age old assumption that this is Eliezer, that the servant is never named: "This omission of a name seems appropriate, since the servant never focuses on his own interests, but instead continually witnesses to God's presence in everything that occurs." Without Eliezer's self-abnegating love for Abraham and Isaac, Rebekah might never have been found and brought home to her bridegroom.

Rabbi David Zauderer, who writes for (and I'm not kidding now) a magazine with the tongue-in-cheek title of *Jewsweek*, pooh-poohs the importance of romance in this story in favor of a deeper, more lasting kind of love. "What an unbelievable story!" he writes. "I mean, would you pick a spouse for a lifetime just because you bumped into her at a bar, and she offered you a drink and even filled up your car with gas?!! Let's get real!" Zauderer goes on to cite the wisdom of the Talmud on what really makes marriage work. "The Talmud tells us," he says, "that when the Torah writes, "Love your friend as you love yourself", it is referring to your spouse, your true best friend." Zauderer also gives credit to Eliezer for understanding this truth: "Who Eliezer was looking for, as an appropriate wife for Isaac, was someone who had an exquisite sensitivity to the needs of others, like a true friend should. Because the very core of a good husband/wife relationship is that they be each other's best friend. Isaac's wife must be a person who will not only respond to her husband's request for help, but will anticipate his unspoken needs and respond to them." In Zauderer's view, Rebekah showed her essential kindness and ability to be a true friend to Isaac by her hospitality to Eliezer and his animals. Those of us who, like Isaac, have found both a romantic partner and a best friend in the same person are blessed indeed. Incidentally, in a nice bit of coincidence, my calendar for Friday, the day I wrote this, featured this thought: "The thing that counts most in the pursuit of happiness is choosing the right companion."

I want to return for a moment to Dr. Esther Menn's comment on Eliezer, that he "continually witnesses to God's presence in everything that occurs." Along with the lessons of God's gift of love, both romantic love and friendship, it seems to me that the story of Isaac and Rebekah serves to remind us that we can see God's hand in the events of our lives when we look with the eyes of faith. Eliezer prays for God to send a young woman who will show hospitality both to himself and to his animals and, indeed, a young woman comes along. But it may also be pure happenstance. It's not a huge stretch to decide that Rebekah sees the wealthily laden camels and the well-dressed, if travel-stained, Eliezer and, like her famously avaricious brother Laban, makes a thinly veiled grab for the goodies.

But that is not how we are called to read the story. Even the ultimately practical Laban, on hearing the story of how Abraham's servant was led to his sister and his home, is moved to remark, "The thing comes from the Lord." In his commentary on Genesis for the Interpretation series, Walter Brueggemann writes: "This text does not stress the leadership of Yahweh as much as it emphasizes the faithful following of the actors. The principal characters accept a reading of reality related to Yahweh. They interpret events accordingly... We do not always know the gifts of God in advance. But given a perspective of faith, we can in subsequent reflection discern the amazing movement of God in events we had not noticed or which we had assigned to other causes... The workings of God are not spectacular, not magical, not oddities. Disclosure of God comes by steady discernment and by readiness to trust..." When we celebrate the presence of

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God's love in our lives through the love of others, we are making a statement of faith, for where the non-believer might see only a more or less self-interested alliance of two individuals, we see evidence of the Spirit of God in human life.

It is instructive that, even though late in their lives, Rebekah practices an outright deception on her husband, nevertheless the story of Isaac and Rebekah has been held up by Jewish sages for centuries as one of the great love stories and great marriages of all time. It is a wry acknowledgement that even the most blessed of human relationships will never be perfect, never without difficulty, never without pain. Even so, the love between two people is to be celebrated, for in that loving relationship, we do glimpse a shadow of what the great love of God for humankind and all creation must be like. And so we move from romance to friendship to something deeper yet. We celebrate today, in this place, the great love that God has for us and how Christ Jesus came to show us the truth of that love, despite our brokenness, and how, in our own halting, sometimes failing ways, we in turn display love for each other through the communion of the saints. For the love that surrounds us all, that binds us together in the Body of Christ, and that brings us together in loving couples, thanks be to God!