

Proper 9, Year A
RCL
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Good Shepherd, Berkeley

In the Genesis stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs we leap from the sacrifice of Isaac last week to the search for Isaac's wife in today's first lesson. Eliezer was Abraham's servant and he's been dispatched to Abraham's kindred to find a suitable wife for Isaac. Abraham has made Eliezer swear that he will not get a wife for Isaac from among the Canaanites, in whose land the nomadic tribe of Abraham now dwells.

Upon first reading it sounds like one more of those patriarchal stories in which the males in the clan are calling all the shots and the women's job is to wait on the men, ascribe to their decisions and pop out male babies for the continuation of Abraham's lineage and the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that he should become a great nation. But as I have studied the scriptures this week, I have become intrigued by Rebecca in this story – her spunk, the transition in her life, and her relationship to Isaac. Such intrigue often invites me to other ways of imagining – poetry, movies, or art – in order to get some insight into the story.

In many paintings of the scene when Eliezer and Rebecca meet at the well, Renaissance artists in particular will often illustrate the context as one of decay. Usually the well is in the center of the picture, but often there are buildings in disrepair, the landscapes are dark. One image from the late 17th century by Bartolome Murillo shows the well itself cracked and broken. Another image from the early 17th century painter, Jacob Hagers, places Rebecca in the midst of a ruined city speaking to Eliezer. With her left arm she points toward the open and more lighted area of the painting, pointing perhaps toward the future that awaits her. The suggestion in all of these images is that Rebecca will be better off leaving her present life, following Eliezer back to

the fields of Caanan where Isaac awaits, and through her marriage enter the great line of ancient Israel's matriarchs.

Rebecca was from a well-to-do family in upper Mesopotamia, now northeastern Syria. She was also the niece of Abraham. The story tells us that one day when she took her flock to the well, she met some strangers. They had been sent by Abraham to find a wife for his son Isaac. Rebecca impressed these strangers. They offered her valuable gifts, including a gold nose-ring and two gold bracelets, which she accepted. These strangers turned out to be servants of her relative Abraham, so she offered them hospitality in her family's home. Once there, the strangers offered her a proposal of marriage. She and her family accepted it. Leaving her home, she set out on a long journey – the husband-to-be whose name was Isaac was about nine hundred kilometers away from her home. When she met him, it was love at first sight for both of them. They married immediately.

There are three distinct timeframes in Rebecca's story in Genesis and today's lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures gives us the first of these moments. Rebecca is introduced as a brave and resourceful young woman – beautiful, shrewd, energetic and strong-willed. We first meet her at the well of Aram-naharaim, doing the expected women's work of filling and carrying the heavy water jars needed for the household. She was confident enough to speak without fear to the strangers she met at the well. She impressed Abraham's servant and is presented to the reader as the answer to Eliezer's prayer; and so he offered her valuable gifts to "clinch the deal" if you will. Rebecca led the men to her home, to introduce them to her family. Her brother Laban spoke as head of the house, inviting them to stay in his household. It is not clear whether or not their father Bethuel was alive, but for some reason he was incapable of acting as head of the household. Perhaps the writer is doing some foreshadowing here because later on in the story of

the patriarchs and matriarchs Laban will figure prominently in the story of Isaac and Rebecca's son Jacob and his marriage arrangements. A proposal of marriage, on behalf of Isaac, was made. It was accepted by Rebecca and by her family. *'And they called Rebecca and said to her "Will you go with this man?" She said "I will". So they sent away their sister Rebecca and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his man, and they blessed Rebecca.'*

There are two types of gifts mentioned in this story, both related to marriage customs of the time: the bride price, given by the family of the groom to the bride's family. In Rebecca's case, it is gold and silver jewelry and clothing, with additional gifts for members of her family. The second gift was the dowry, which was money, servants/slaves and gifts taken *with* the bride to her new home; Rebecca took her nurse and maids with her as part of her dowry. Clearly, Rebecca impressed all the people who met her and by this the Genesis writer wants us to know that she was a good match for Isaac. As she faced the journey to her new home, she seemed sure of her own judgment, and ready for this daunting new experience.

The description of Rebecca's betrothal and marriage gives a fair picture of marriage practices among the early Hebrew people: the marriage was arranged between families rather than between the individuals themselves. There were definite legal procedures to be followed: in Mesopotamia, a marriage arranged by a brother of the woman was only valid if she gave her full consent. This is why the biblical text mentions consultation with Rebecca. Interestingly enough, Rebecca had more say in whom she married than Isaac, her future husband, did. Genesis 24:8 suggests that the marriage would not have gone ahead without her consent, but Isaac is expected to marry the woman brought home to him by his father's agents.

Next we hear that Isaac took his bride-to-be into the tent of his mother. Sarah must have been very old by now, and if she suspected she was to die soon, it may have been she

who initiated the plan to get a wife for Isaac. The phrase 'Isaac loved her' (meaning Rebecca) is used, something most unusual for the biblical text. Then Sarah died, and Rebecca comforted Isaac after his mother's death; the deep bond that Isaac had with Sarah was replaced by his love for Rebecca. It is an unusually romantic touch that is exceptional in the typical contractual arrangements of these patriarchal marriages.

One commentator notes that it was possible that in the culture in which these stories were written women enjoyed great freedom and prestige. The stories in Genesis and Exodus showed them as independent and strong, smart and tough. They displayed leadership and initiative. They almost always got their way when they wanted something. Rebecca, for example, is clearly in charge of her own destiny, both in deciding on her own future, and in shaping the future of her clan. This was probably because women were necessary for the survival of the tribe, and they knew it. They did a wide range of tasks, without which the clan or family simply could not have managed. They moved freely in society, and were not confined within the home. No birkas for these women. The Bible stories show that they spoke and acted with confidence.

Their contribution to the culture of the time was significant. The stories as we have them in the Bible were edited much later by male writers, but there are hints that women had a thriving cultural tradition of their own. Many of their stories dealt with families, children, food supplies, security/safety and home-places. All these were matters that related to women's spheres of influence, and some scholars suggest that many of the stories of Genesis were originally women's stories, preserved by women in the clan.

I remember touring an excavation in Jerusalem 20 years ago, of an underground street in the Jewish Quarter, dating from the early Roman Period that corresponds to the reign of Herod from 37 BCE to 70 CE, but with elements from as early as the 8th century CE found there. One

of the discovered artifacts was an ancient fertility goddess, Ashtereth, revered by women for centuries throughout Mesopotamia. When a horrified woman on the tour wondered why such an idol would be found in the ruins of a wealthy Jewish home, the archeologist who was with us said they not unusual in such excavations and that they were an illustration of pragmatic eclecticism of women in the household “keeping their options open” when it came to praying for a pregnancy.

Archeological evidence suggests that women played an active role in religious matters in the period these great narratives were first told. The concept of monotheism was just beginning to develop, but many women probably did worship a fertility goddess, the Great Mother, source of plant, animal and human life. Ancient Near Eastern religions certainly had fertility of the soil and animal life as one of their main foci, with priestesses who served the forces of Nature (the power of river and rain water, abundance of crops and animals, etc.) This “underground religion” so to speak, survived alongside Jewish monotheism even into the first centuries before Christ. I’m guessing Rebecca might have had an Ashtereth or two among the household gods that she stole from her father’s house and carried to Isaac’s.

So on this Independence Day weekend, I commend to you one of the most independent foremothers of our faith – Rebecca – who was able to choose the future that awaited her with Isaac in a way that many of her daughters in successive generations were unable to do. She took initiative, she acted on her own behalf, she heard God’s call in the invitation of Abraham’s servant Eliezer, and to this call she said, “I will.” Later in the story when she connives against her husband and eldest of her twins to secure privilege and inheritance for her favorite son she

appears more devious, less lovely than in our introduction to her here. We'll leave it to next week's preacher to sort that one out.

For now, I invite you to ponder this story as you go about your week. Think about Rebecca as you might think about Mary the mother of Jesus at the time the Angel Gabriel announced that she would bear God's son. Think about how a woman's freely given consent has at so many of the critical junctures of history been the one thing necessary to move God's plan of salvation forward. And then, I invite you to find that part of you that is like Rebecca. Ask her what she needs in *your life* to help God's plan along. And find from Rebecca the courage, the spunk and the perspicacity to cooperate with God in carrying out God's mission in this place, in this time.