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Reading Genesis: Isaac and Rebekah in Ordinary Time (Genesis 24. 34-38, 42-49, 58-67)

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‘It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife’. So begins Jane Austen’s wonderful novel, *Pride and Prejudice* – and what was true of her world in 18th century England seems also true of the vastly different world of the Patriarchal Tales in the book of Genesis. Our reading today comes from Chapter 24, in which Isaac, son of the elderly and wealthy Abraham, is in ‘want’ of a wife and Abraham’s faithful servant has been dispatched to find him a suitable bride – not one ‘from the daughters of the Canaanites’ insists Abraham, but from among my kindred, from ‘my father’s house.’ (Gen. 24. 38).

What follows is the story of the betrothal of Isaac and Rebekah through the agency of this unnamed servant, and the continued working out of God’s promise to Abraham that, through Isaac, he would be the father of a great nation. After the drama of much of Abraham’s own story – displacement from his homeland, mysterious covenant, radical testing of faith – this seems more like a story about the unfolding of God’s purposes in the particulars of ordinary, daily life. Isaac is the most unspectacular of the patriarchs – the hero of no major narrative of his own.¹ Yet it seems he is somehow a necessary figure, and I wonder what his story might have to say to us?

The story of Isaac’s betrothal is the first of its kind in the scriptures, but by no means the last. It is what scholar Robert Alter has called one of the major ‘type-scenes’ in biblical literature – a story repeated in different contexts with different characters. There are remarkably similar ‘getting of a wife’ stories told about Jacob

¹ Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven’t Heard* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 124.

and Moses, for example, and variations on this theme in the book of Ruth and the story of Saul.² The interesting thing about a 'type-scene' is that it is told according to a set of conventions that would be recognised by its hearers, but these conventions can then be played with, thus allowing certain themes to be highlighted or subordinated in the same way that a musical fugue draws out different elements of its base melody.

So what is the base melody of the betrothal type-scene? The future bridegroom must journey to a foreign land, signifying his emergence from the immediate family circle. There he encounters a girl or girls at a well in the desert, a symbol of the feminine and of fertility. Someone, normally the man, draws water from the well which establishes a bond between them and then the girl or girls rush home to bring news of the stranger's arrival. The verbs 'hurry' and 'run' are, says Alter, 'given recurrent emphasis at this juncture' of the story. Finally, there is the betrothal, in most cases accompanied by an invitation to a meal and so the gift of hospitality.

All these elements are present in our reading today, together with some significant and revealing variations. First, 'Isaac is conspicuous by his absence from the scene: this is in fact the only instance where a surrogate rather than the man himself meets the girl at the well'.³ Second, corresponding perhaps to the absence of the bridegroom, it's only in this betrothal scene that the girl draws water from the well. Indeed, notes Alter, the biblical narrator goes out of their way to emphasise this fact 'by presenting Rebekah as a continuous whirl of purposeful activity'. As the encounter is told, 'she is the subject of eleven verbs of action ... going down to the well, drawing water, filling the pitcher, pouring, giving drink'.⁴ And while the verbs of 'rushing and hurrying' are usually reserved for the moment the girl runs back home to tell of her meeting the stranger, in this case they are also 'repeatedly attached to

² Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 1981), 51ff.

³ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 53.

⁴ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 54.

Rebekah's actions at the well' – which is not entirely surprising given that there were ten camels to water. After a long desert journey, a camel drinks many gallons of water, so 'Rebekah hurrying down the steps of the well would have had to be a nonstop blur of motion in order to carry up all this water in her single jug'.⁵

Rebekah's 'bustling activity' foreshadows, it seems, her role in promoting her favoured son Jacob over Esau, and her character as 'the shrewdest and the most potent of the matriarchs'.⁶

Which brings us back to Isaac and, for a Patriarch of Israel, his remarkably unpatriarchal approach to life. It's not only in this case that Isaac seems to content to let life happen to and around him. In Chapter 26 of Genesis, we hear that Isaac is forced to move his household twice because the Philistines have blocked up wells he has dug to water his flocks – and rather than taking a stand and negotiating a truce as Abraham had done, Isaac simply moves on until he finds a place where (he says) 'the LORD has given us space that we may be fruitful in the land' (Gen. 26. 22). And later in Chapter 27, we have the blind and bed-ridden Isaac duped into giving his blessing not to Esau his first-born, but to Esau's younger twin brother, Jacob.

So from the beginning, his delayed birth and his non-resistance in the episode of his binding to the very end, Isaac seems to have been a passive, self-effacing, conflict-averse kind of soul. (For you Enneagram devotees, probably a 9!). He is the first person in the Bible who is said to love his wife, and it seems too that he took his mother's death hard – his marriage to Rebekah 'comforting' him. The biblical critics tend to treat him and his gentleness dismissively. Writes Borgman: 'Abraham's son Isaac, as enterprising sons go, is a flop'. In an age when the ordinary is despised – everyone wants to be a celebrity, a hero, or to make a dramatic difference, we don't value his quiet and relatively uneventful experience. But this too is the arena of God's unfolding, and he is not written out of the scriptural story.

⁵ Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996), 116.

⁶ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 54.

‘I am the ... God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’ (Exod.3. 6). This is God speaking to Moses by the burning bush. ‘Have you not read what was said to you by God, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”?’ (Matt. 22.14). This is Jesus speaking to the Sadducees. ‘The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob ... has glorified his servant Jesus ...’ (Acts 3. 13). This is Peter speaking in the Acts of the Apostles. Isaac’s story is irreducibly part of God’s story, part of the way God identifies God’s self to the people of Israel and the followers of Christ. And this makes me wonder about two things.

The first is to do with the significance of *our* agency. Our faith teaches that we are called to participate in God’s work and mission, that who we are and what we do matters to God and makes a difference to others. But the story of Isaac is a reminder that we are, at the same time, part of a story that is bigger than us and our efforts. The promise was made to Abraham before Isaac was born, and was worked out through Jacob long after Isaac died. Isaac was part of a larger whole, and he played his part – wittingly *and* unwittingly, actively *and* passively. Isaac reminds us that it is God, ultimately, who acts and purposes and promises, and we are not God.

And second, this story reminds us of the quotidian, daily setting for the outworking of God’s mission in the world. God is at work in human relationships of all kinds, in and through the necessities of bodily life – keeping a flock watered, finding a place to live in peace, raising children, eating and offering hospitality to strangers. After the excitement (liturgically speaking) of Lent, Easter, Pentecost and Trinity Sundays, we are now embarked in the church’s calendar on the season of what used to be called Ordinary Time. And isn’t that where so much of our lives are lived? Not in the dramas and crises – whether happy or unhappy – but just in daily faithfulness, as best we can, to the tasks that our life presents us with each day. Isaac is the anti-hero (the faithful public servant, school teacher, home maker, farmer, tradesperson, GP, parish priest ...), the Patriarch of ordinary time and a sign of God with us in ordinary life.

And yet, it isn't really so ordinary. For Isaac, his experience of life was shot through with the promise he inherited and which was reiterated to him personally by God: 'I am the God of your father Abraham; do not be afraid, for I am with you and will bless you and make your offspring numerous for my servant Abraham's sake' (Gen. 26. 24). For us too, ordinary time, though frequently unspectacular, is nevertheless infused with the gift of forgiveness and promise of abundant life. Often, in the daily-ness we are not present to this reality. But like Isaac, we are bidden to entrust ourselves to its promise, keeping faith with our own lives in and through which God is still at work reconciling all things and bringing creation to fulfilment.