

Marriage and the Covenant
Genesis 24:1 - 67
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
July 3, 2016

God's Call and the Unfolding Covenant

Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years. And the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things.

In Genesis chapter 12 the story the Bible tells focuses upon one man, Abraham. God calls Abraham. Abraham responds to God's call and leaves Haran and travels to Canaan. God gives to Abraham a covenant. It is this covenant that sets Abraham apart. We call Abraham the "Father of Faith." He believes God. He trusts in God. He walks with God.

Now, in Genesis chapter 24, Abraham's story is about to close. What will be next? What will become of the covenant when Abraham dies? Will the covenant pass from Abraham to his son, Isaac? And, how will the covenant be passed on from one generation to the next? In Genesis 24, the focus of the story of Genesis moves from Abraham to Isaac: but it does so in a surprising, unexpected way. In Genesis 24 we are introduced to the remarkable woman who will become Isaac's wife: Rebekah. It is Rebekah who will play an essential role in the passing of the covenant from Abraham to Isaac and, in the next generation, from Isaac to their son, Jacob.

The story told in Genesis 24 is the longest episode of the book of Genesis. It tells of Isaac, the son of the covenant. Isaac needs a wife. In this story, we see the passing of the covenant from one generation to the next.

Isaac needs a wife: Passing the Covenant to the next Generation

²And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he had, "Put your hand under my thigh, ³that I may make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and God of the earth,

The book of Genesis makes clear that the God of the Bible is a patient God. God is the God of the long haul. Nothing happens in a hurry in Genesis. God calls Abraham when Abraham is about seventy-five years old. God gives to Abraham the promise that he and his wife Sarah will have a son in their old age. They wait twenty-five years before Isaac arrives on the scene. It was not until Isaac was about forty years old, after his mother Sarah has died, that Abraham begins to think about finding a wife for Isaac. Like I said, nothing happens in a hurry in the book of Genesis.

Some months ago, Susan Patton, class of 1977, Princeton University, provoked significant controversy when she wrote an opinion piece for The Daily Princetonian. In it she wrote, "I sincerely feel that too much focus has been placed on encouraging young women only to achieve professionally. Here's what nobody is telling you," Patton wrote. "Find a husband on campus before you graduate." In the days following, Patton was vilified. The idea of making a goal during university studies of finding a husband was

ridiculed. It is perceived as being unimportant. During my days at Lawrence University I had a friend who would talk forthrightly saying that an essential question he needed to answer during his days in college was “Who will be the mother of my children?” Some mocked my friend for his viewpoint. But those who mocked were in error. This is a valid, essential question. Pondering seriously the question “Whom will I marry?” is an important facet of embarking upon honorable, faithful adulthood.

Isaac is the son of the covenant. He is the son of the promise. God has established his covenant with Abraham, Isaac’s father. How will the covenant be passed on to the next generation?

At this point I need to offer two caveats before we move on. The first is this: while marriage is the norm, not everyone marries. Jesus, of course, was not married. [As an aside, did you see the news reports where Karen King, the Harvard researcher who published “The Wife of Jesus,” acknowledged that the papyrus manuscript is a forgery?] The Apostle Paul certainly encouraged contentment in singleness. The Roman Catholic Church requires its priests to be unmarried. The Orthodox Churches permit parish priests to be married, but if a priest aspires to ecclesiastical leadership and authority as a bishop or higher, he must be unmarried. Like I said, marriage is the norm, but not everyone is called by God to marry.

The second caveat is this: while the rest of this sermon will be exploring the steps taken to find a wife for Isaac, it is important to acknowledge in the modern Western world the difficulties parents face in assisting their children to marry. Some cultures follow the practice of arranged marriages. Parents work out the details of finding a spouse *for* their children and it is assumed that husband and wife will learn to love one another *after* they are married. Other cultures use the services of matchmakers: think of the musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, “Matchmaker, Matchmaker, make me a match.” The modern version of matchmakers are the dating sites such as eHarmony. In contrast, in the modern world, the expectation for finding a spouse seems to fall entirely upon the young man and the young woman. Parents feel they should not inquire regarding their children’s dating partners. It is not their place as parents to be involved in the marriage consideration of their children. That is the cultural expectation today. I do not believe that this is a good thing, but I understand the reality of it.

You marry an individual, but with that individual comes a family, with all of its background, history, culture and social dynamics. Parents have more experience in navigating these waters than their children. Parents can, and should, offer wisdom to their children regarding the decisions they make in marriage. I know, I know, that in saying this I am swimming against the current of our culture. Still, I think that it should be said.

Our next point is another important caveat: the Bible is not a marriage manual.

The Bible is not a marriage manual

²And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household,

One mistake people sometimes make is to view the Bible as a practical “How-to” manual. It would be a serious error to read Genesis 24 looking for guidance as to *how to find a godly wife*. For one thing, most modern Americans do not have servants available to whom they might entrust the task. And, if one did happen to have a servant, how would you react if I told you that the first step of biblical guidance is to “Put your hand under my thigh.” I do not think so. ☺

There are all sorts of ways to organize marriage and family. Look at the various cultures of the world. Lois Ann and I have been privileged to know all sorts of people, from all sorts of cultural backgrounds, who have made marriages that have worked and been successful. The Bible does not offer a checklist of do this, do not do that, in order to find the husband/wife of your dreams. If you want guidance on how to find a spouse, read the novels of Jane Austin. Her story, *Pride and Prejudice*, is full of wisdom and insight. And, for fun, if you would like to see how these marriage questions translate into different cultures, watch the Bollywood movie *Bride and Prejudice*. ☺ Great fun!

While the Bible is not a marriage manual, it is important to also note that the Bible affirms the place and value of marriage in life.

The Bible affirms the place and value of marriage in life

³that I may make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell,

⁶Abraham said to him, “See to it that you do not take my son back there.

Abraham commissions his servant to the task of finding a wife for Isaac. Marriage has an important place in the unfolding of our lives. God established marriage. That is the message of the second chapter of the Bible. For these reasons, it is important for us as Christian believers to lift up and affirm the value of marriage. Our culture today encourages all sorts of things jump in front of marriage as a priority: education, career matters, home ownership, independence, having a solid bank account, travel opportunities, living together, etc. Many couples believe that living together is “preparation” for marriage. In that they are mistaken. The spiritual dynamics of marriage are very different, much higher, than those of merely living together. Couples considering living together do so with a much shorter horizon. They are not considering a life time commitment. Marriage, by definition, is for a lifetime. It encourages a couple to think and talk about lifelong matters. There is no explicit commitment in the choice to live together. Marriage *begins* with commitment. A couple that chooses to live together informs their family and friends of the choice. A couple to be married invites their family and friends to join with them to witness their vows, to celebrate their wedding day, and to support them in their marriage.

It is not surprising therefore to discover that marriage and our spiritual commitments go hand in hand.

Marriage and Spiritual Commitments go hand in hand

you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell,⁴ but will go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac.

Foremost in Abraham's mind is the need that Isaac and his future wife share a common spiritual foundation. Abraham is adamant that Isaac's wife not come from among the Canaanite people where he and his family dwelt. Marriage will either strengthen or undermine your spiritual commitments. It is very difficult for couples who come from *different* religious traditions to maintain the same level of spiritual commitment to *both* traditions. Typically, both become less observant. For this reason, it matters what pool you fish in when seeking a spouse. It was important for Isaac that his wife not be a pagan Canaanite, but from his God-fearing extended family back in Mesopotamia. If Isaac's wife had been a Canaanite, she would have represented a threat to the covenant. It was essential that his wife share the covenant with him. It is important to know who not to marry; and whom to marry.

Next, in the search for a marriage partner, pray: ask God to intervene.

Pray: Ask God to intervene

⁷The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my kindred, and who spoke to me and swore to me, 'To your offspring I will give this land,' he will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there.

¹²And he said, "O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham.

Abraham and his servant negotiate an agreement regarding the search for a wife for Isaac. The servant leads a caravan of camels and other travelers back to Mesopotamia, to the village of Nahor, to seek a wife for Isaac. After arrival, the servant begins his search in earnest, with a prayer. In this, he provides an important model for us.

When our children were little, Lois Ann used two books by Lee Roberts, *Praying God's will for Son* and *Praying God's will for my Daughter* as a prayer guide. [Lois Ann tells me that she still uses these books to guide her prayers for our children.] As you know, it is important to pray for our children. It is also good to pray for the future spouses of our children. Lois Ann did so regularly. The son of an Orthodox Presbyterian pastor whom we know in New Jersey was recently married. At a reception following the wedding, the bride's parents showed the video taken when the bride was about four years old. In the video, the bride's father is talking with her about the man she would one day marry. They speak to this – as yet unknown man – and they prayed together for her future husband. They showed to the people gathered to celebrate the wedding. Cool idea that. Wish we had thought of it. ☺

In addition to praying for our children, their spouses and future spouses, we also should make use of the opportunities God's provides.

Make use of the opportunities God provides to you

¹⁰Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and departed, taking all sorts of choice gifts from his master; and he arose and went to Mesopotamia to the city of Nahor. ¹¹And he made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water at the time of evening, the time when women go out to draw water.

It is five hundred and twenty miles from Hebron, where Abraham is residing, to the town of Nahor in Mesopotamia. The caravan of camels could travel seventeen to twenty-three miles per day. It would take about twenty-six days to travel the distance. That would be plenty of time for the servant to consider how best to seek a satisfactory wife for Isaac.

In addition to praying, the servant takes the appropriate action of bringing his camels to the watering site outside the city walls. The women of the city will gather there in the evening to draw water. In this way, he will meet likely candidates for matrimony. The servant prays further, saying: "O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. ¹³Behold, I am standing by the spring of water, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. ¹⁴Let the young woman to whom I shall say, 'Please let down 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." From these prayers it is clear that the woman he hopes to find for Isaac will be gracious and hospitable. She will go beyond what is merely required of her. She will go the second mile. A thirsty camel could easily drink twenty gallons of water. Her offer to water the camels represented a significant commitment, a sacrifice on her part.

Certain that God has led and guided him to Rebekah, the servant asks to meet her family and presents his offer of marriage to her. Negotiations are quickly concluded – no small feat in the Middle East ☺ -- and celebrations follow.

Next, we note that when it is time to marry, marry.

When it is time to marry, marry!

When they arose in the morning, he said, "Send me away to my master." ⁵⁵Her brother and her mother said, "Let the young woman remain with us a while, at least ten days; after that she may go." ⁵⁶

⁵⁸And they called Rebekah and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" She said, "I will go."

The next morning, after the night of celebration, the servant begins to prepare to depart. However, Rebekah's family wishes to delay her departure. In part, this is simply Middle Eastern hospitality. The servant does not wish to be delayed further. Finally, the decision falls to Rebekah herself. "Will you go with this man?" She said, "I will go."

As part of its commitment to the pursuit of spiritual growth, each month when the Session of Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church meets, we read together a portion of the Westminster statement of faith. We are working our way through the Larger

Catechism at present. In May we looked at the teaching on the Seventh Commandment: Thou shall not commit adultery. The catechism asked, "What particular sins does the seventh commandment forbid?" There follows ten lines of sexual sins forbidden by the commandment. One jumped out: "unnecessary delays in marrying." In marriage we establish new spiritual realities: the couple make their public promises to one another; their family stands alongside of them in celebration and support; and a new legal reality is created. Once a couple determines to marry, they should do so in a timely way.

Permit me to offer a personal illustration of this. Lois Ann and I became engaged in late January of 1982. Lois Ann was living in Texas. I was on track to graduate from Princeton with my Master of Divinity degree a year and a half later in the spring of 1983. We first planned to get married after I graduated. A couple we knew told us that they had followed a similar timeline in their marriage plans but that, if they had it to do over again, they would have gotten married and lived apart. That seemed to us to be good advice and that is what we did. We were married on May 8, 1982, after an engagement of just a few months. When it is time to marry, marry.

Lastly, marriage roots us in time and space, gives direction and comfort to life.

Marriage roots us in time and space, gives direction, and comfort to life

⁶²Now Isaac had returned from Beer-lahai-roi and was dwelling in the Negeb. ⁶³And Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening.

⁶⁷Then Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother and took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

In verses 62 – 63 we are told that Isaac had been living in one place, was now dwelling in the Negev (wilderness dessert) and could be found meditating in a field come evening. These verses are intended to suggest that Isaac's life at present, prior to his marriage to Rebekah, is rather directionless. In modern English, when we speak of someone marrying, we talk of them "settling down." The idea is not only that we might be sowing wild oats while single, but also that in taking on a spouse, a wife or husband, our lives begin to take root: buy a home, have children, establish a career, build friendships within your neighborhood. Isaac had returned from Beer-lahai-roi and was dwelling in the Negeb. ⁶³And Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening. Isaac does not appear to have the same depth of spiritual commitment as his father, Abraham. As becomes clear in subsequent stories, Isaac is often passive. He would be a good illustration of the Talking Heads song, "Letting the days go by, letting the water hold me up." Isaac needs a good woman in his life. He certainly gets one in Rebekah. As said earlier, marriage is not for everyone. But for many, marriage provides the foundation for the unfolding of a life in honorable adulthood.

Conclusion

As we have noted, Abraham is the bearer of the covenant. He is the father of faith. God called. Abraham responded. There is a sense in which the story of faith in

God begins with Abraham and the covenant God established with him and his descendants. At the same time, Genesis makes clear that there were many threats to the covenant. Sarah's barrenness was the first, but there were others: Hagar, and Isaac's half-brother Ishmael; Abraham's disastrous journey into Egypt; the competition between Lot and Abraham's households; God's testing of Abraham; and so on. In spite of these threats and uncertainties, God remained faithful. The covenant continued.

Now we face a new question: will the covenant be passed from one generation to the next? Abraham is a man of faith. Is Isaac also a man of faith? Isaac's story is different from that of his father. God appeared to Abraham on several occasions in a special way. God walks with Isaac in the normal way. In Genesis 24, God does not directly intervene in the arrangement of the marriage between Isaac and Rebekah. God is not directly involved in the unfolding story. God leads the servant, but he does not directly appear. But God is at work, as seen in the servant's answered prayers. I would argue that this is the normal walk of faith. This is normal life unfolding. We walk by faith, not by sight. The covenant carries on from one generation to the next by God's grace and power. The covenant carries on as the Lord leads Abraham's servant to Rebekah. The covenant carries on as the servant in turn leads Rebekah to Isaac. Years later, the covenant carries on as Rebekah leads Isaac to favor Jacob as the chosen son of the covenant. And, through the influence of Rebekah, Isaac's faith in the God of his father Abraham is deepened.

At this point in the biblical story, the people of God are comprised of a single extended family. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are the patriarchs, the first men of faith to walk with God. To be part of the people of God you had to be related to one of these patriarchs. Later, the patriarch Jacob will have twelve sons, from whom the twelve tribes of Israel will be established. By the time we reach the book of Exodus, the people of God are no longer a single family, but a particular nation, the children of Israel, the Hebrews. To be among God's people you had to be part of the Jewish people. Next, at the time of Jesus, the requirement to become one of God's people shifted once more. Jesus declared (John 3:16) "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Now, to be part of God's family requires simply faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It is available to whoever believes. It is not needed to be part of the clans of patriarchs, or the tribes of Israel. To be among God's people requires only belief and trust in Christ. Turn to him in believing faith and be welcomed into the family of God.

Say "Amen!" Somebody.

Genesis 24:1 – 67

Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years. And the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things. ²And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he had, “Put your hand under my thigh, ³that I may make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell, ⁴but will go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac.” ⁵The servant said to him, “Perhaps the woman may not be willing to follow me to this land. Must I then take your son back to the land from which you came?” ⁶Abraham said to him, “See to it that you do not take my son back there. ⁷The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father’s house and from the land of my kindred, and who spoke to me and swore to me, ‘To your offspring I will give this land,’ he will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there. ⁸But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this oath of mine; only you must not take my son back there.” ⁹So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master and swore to him concerning this matter.

¹⁰Then the servant took ten of his master’s camels and departed, taking all sorts of choice gifts from his master; and he arose and went to Mesopotamia to the city of Nahor. ¹¹And he made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water at the time of evening, the time when women go out to draw water. ¹²And he said, “O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. ¹³Behold, I am standing by the spring of water, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. ¹⁴Let the young woman to whom I shall say, ‘Please let down 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.”

¹⁵Before he had finished speaking, behold, Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham’s brother, came out with her water jar on her shoulder. ¹⁶The young woman was very attractive in appearance, a maiden whom no man had known. She went down to the spring and filled her jar and came up. ¹⁷Then the servant ran to meet her and said, “Please give me a little water to drink from your jar.” ¹⁸She said, “Drink, my lord.” And she quickly let down her jar upon her hand and gave him a drink. ¹⁹When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, “I will draw water for your camels also, until they have finished drinking.” ²⁰So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough and ran again to the well to draw water, and she drew for all his camels. ²¹The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether the LORD had prospered his journey or not.

²²When the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold ring weighing a half shekel, and two bracelets for her arms weighing ten gold shekels, ²³and said, “Please tell me whose daughter you are. Is there room in your father’s house for us to spend the night?” ²⁴She said to him, “I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor.” ²⁵She added, “We have plenty of both straw and fodder, and room to spend the night.” ²⁶The man bowed his head and worshiped the LORD ²⁷and 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 in the way to the house of my master's kinsmen." ²⁸ Then the young woman ran and told her mother's household about these things.

²⁹ Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban. Laban ran out toward the man, to the spring. ³⁰ As soon as he saw the ring and the bracelets on his sister's arms, and heard the words of Rebekah his sister, "Thus the man spoke to me," he went to the man. And behold, he was standing by the camels at the spring. ³¹ He said, "Come in, O blessed of the LORD. Why do you stand outside? For I have prepared the house and a place for the camels." ³² So the man came to the house and unharnessed the camels, and gave straw and fodder to the camels, and there was water to wash his feet and the feet of the men who were with him. ³³ Then food was set before him to eat. But he said, "I will not eat until I have said what I have to say." He said, "Speak on."

³⁴ So he said, "I am Abraham's servant. ³⁵ The LORD has greatly blessed my master, and he has become great. He has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male servants and female servants, camels and donkeys. ³⁶ And Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master when she was old, and to him he has given all that he has. ³⁷ My master made me swear, saying, 'You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I dwell, ³⁸ but you shall go to my father's house and to my clan and take a wife for my son.' ³⁹ I said to my master, 'Perhaps the woman will not follow me.' ⁴⁰ But he said to me, 'The LORD, before whom I have walked, will send his angel with you and prosper your way. You shall take a wife for my son from my clan and from my father's house. ⁴¹ Then you will be free from my oath, when you come to my clan. And if they will not give her to you, you will be free from my oath.'

⁴² "I came today to the spring and said, 'O LORD, the God of my master Abraham, if now you are prospering the way that I go, ⁴³ behold, I am standing by the spring of water. Let the virgin who comes out to draw water, to whom I shall say, 'Please give me a little water from your jar to drink,' ⁴⁴ and who will say to me, 'Drink, and I will draw for your camels also,' let her be the woman whom the LORD has appointed for my master's son.'

⁴⁵ "Before I had finished speaking in my heart, behold, Rebekah came out with her water jar on her shoulder, and she went down to the spring and drew water. I said to her, 'Please let me drink.' ⁴⁶ She quickly let down her jar from her shoulder and said, 'Drink, and I will give your camels drink also.' So I drank, and she gave the camels drink also. ⁴⁷ Then I asked her, 'Whose daughter are you?' She said, 'The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor's son, whom Milcah bore to him.' So I put the ring on her nose and the bracelets on her arms. ⁴⁸ Then I bowed my head and worshiped the LORD and blessed the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me by the right way to take the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son. ⁴⁹ Now then, if you are going to show steadfast love and faithfulness to my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, that I may turn to the right hand or to the left."

⁵⁰ Then Laban and Bethuel answered and said, "The thing has come from the LORD; we cannot speak to you bad or good. ⁵¹ Behold, Rebekah is before you; take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son, as the LORD has spoken."

⁵² When Abraham's servant heard their words, he bowed himself to the earth before the LORD. ⁵³ And the servant brought out jewelry of silver and of gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekah. He also gave to her brother and to her mother costly ornaments. ⁵⁴ And he and the men who were with him ate and drank, and they spent the night there. When they arose in the

morning, he said, "Send me away to my master."⁵⁵ Her brother and her mother said, "Let the young woman remain with us a while, at least ten days; after that she may go."⁵⁶ But he said to them, "Do not delay me, since the LORD has prospered my way. Send me away that I may go to my master."⁵⁷ They said, "Let us call the young woman and ask her."⁵⁸ And they called Rebekah and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" She said, "I will go."⁵⁹ So they sent away Rebekah their sister and her nurse, and Abraham's servant and his men.⁶⁰ And they blessed Rebekah and said to her,

"Our sister, may you become
thousands of ten thousands,
and may your offspring possess
the gate of those who hate him!"

⁶¹ Then Rebekah and her young women arose and rode on the camels and followed the man. Thus the servant took Rebekah and went his way.

⁶² Now Isaac had returned from Beer-lahai-roi and was dwelling in the Negeb. ⁶³ And Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening. And he lifted up his eyes and saw, and behold, there were camels coming. ⁶⁴ And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she dismounted from the camel ⁶⁵ and said to the servant, "Who is that man, walking in the field to meet us?" The servant said, "It is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. ⁶⁶ And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. ⁶⁷ Then Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother and took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.