

“Where’s the hope? What a Question!”
 Sermon for First Sunday in Advent: HOPE
 Text: Genesis 24:10-28

“Why do you preach the way you do?” I almost slurped my fresh cup of coffee! Excuse me, why do I preach the way I do? I think I then asked, “What do you mean by ‘the way I do?’” He responded with an observation that no careful preacher wants to hear: “I listen for a connection between the text and what you are preaching—all fine stuff, mind you—but I really struggle to find any connection.” Now there are not tapes, or transcripts to afford us any great precision, or exactitude—but I think that the next thing that followed in our 2 1/2 hour conversation was “Funny you should mention that . . . my wife has the same problem with my sermons *frequently* and, to be honest, I am so grateful when she points out that disjunction. Typically, I go back to the drawing board, so to speak, and try to fix it. Everyone benefits from that critical process, I think, at least I do.” She wonders where I get some of my thoughts from . . . and that ties into the “Why” question rather neatly. And, before we proceed another syllable, I want to say how much I appreciate the respectful, loving, friendly tone that informed this exchange. It was two brothers sharing Christianly; and, frankly, there’s way too little of that.

And now that I’ve been able to process some of the shock and substance of the conversation, I want to share some provocative ideas, matter arising. The question was “Why do you preach the way you do?” not, “Why do you preach?” and not, “Why do sermons anyway?” Friends, the first question before us this morning, is “Where’s the hope?” It is not anything about why I preach, or why I preach the way I do. So, I intend to get to “Where’s the hope?” “Where’s the hope in Genesis 24 in particular?” and, I promise you, we will get there. We will get there because we need the hope that is in the word of God. We need the hope that drove Abraham to send Eleazar to the city of Nahor, to the city of Abraham’s brother to *find a wife for his master Isaac*. Now I noticed a peculiar thing, the phrase **my master** occurs twenty-two times in this chapter. So that bears some looking into. **My master** occurs as frequently in this text as “*My precious!*” occurs in “*The Lord of the Rings*,” it is Gollum’s center of gravity, his cry his obsession. What Gollum serves is the power of the ring! Eleazar serves Abraham and Isaac, **my Master** on a vastly superior and significant journey. It is darkness versus light, death versus life . . . Eleazar is advancing the **hope of all the ages**.

The Hope of the Ages

Jesus comes, He comes in glory,
 Echoes through the ages hoary
 Blessèd hope and thrilling story,
 Hallelujah! Jesus comes!

Refrain

*Hope of all the ages past,
 King of kings, He comes at last.
 Up, ye saints of God awaking!
 See the morning light is breaking!
 Hallelujah! Jesus comes!*

And that hope is the stakes. That is what is riding on this bride-quest mission. Rebekah is just like Mary—neither maiden had any idea what they were getting into! Both ordained to be vessels of the seed of promise; the first in transmission of that

seed, and the latter in the consummation of that promise. Nahor's descendants were related to Abraham, but they were not informed about the divine rescue mission behind **Unto us a child is born, Unto us a son is given . . .** celebrated by the prophet Isaiah:

Isaiah 9:6-7

**6 For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;
And the government will [a]rest on His shoulders;
And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.
7 There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace,
On the throne of David and over his kingdom,
To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness
From then on and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this.**
New American Standard Bible (NASB)

Of course not, Rebekah lived centuries prior to Isaiah. However, Abraham know about the promises of God and Abraham was probably aware of the promise of Gen. 3:15: **I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring; he shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel.** This enmity explains much about our world—the conflict between good and evil, the prevalence of sin and the remedy. Rebekah would carry that seed, the seed of promise from Isaac to Jacob and Judah would be her grandson. And so it would continue: a divine promise carried in the flesh, in the bloodline of the Redeemer whose birth is our hope! All in one unbroken line from Eve's Seth to the Holy Spirit's Christ child/ **holy thing**—our Lord and Savior Jesus.

Abraham knew this according to this verse:

7 The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and who swore to me, saying, 'To your [seed] descendants I will give this land,' He will send His angel before you, and you will take a wife for my son from there. 8 But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this my oath; only do not take my son back there."

The seed of Abraham (Isaac) would convey his seed through Rebekah and they together on to Jacob and Leah—for Judah, Leah's fourth son was the heir of the promise. But Rebekah did not know anything about any of this until she became betrothed, and subsequently married Isaac—she married into salvation history and her favoritism, so-called, may partially be justified in her preference of the promised son (Jacob over Esau). We may safely assume that Rebekah came into the knowledge of her husband and embraced the salvation project.

So, why do I preach about salvation history? Because I believe that you need to know about it. About the promises of God, the agency of Christ in fulfilling that heavenly originated mission. You have borne the brunt of Satan's malice. You have fallen into a deep pit of sin and there is no other way of escape. Christ is our only hope!

I feel safe in asserting, that due to her spiritual ignorance, Rebekah was not into it. It is more likely that she was into dreaming about marriage, or dreaming about a kind, wonderful husband and children and a home of her own. She was filled with the natural desires and longings of a beautiful, marriageable maiden. She had no idea that Eleazar's prayers had pointed God's finger to her! How do I know that last point? Because it is not given to us to know what she was dreaming—we can only infer these things by her free, willingness to be a prospective bride.

Here's Eleazar's prayer (as revealed by the word of God—what a blessing!):

O Lord, God of my master Abraham—he is asking God, the only true God is who he addresses—**grant me success today**. He asks for **success** on that very day, **today**. He means business and has a laser-like focus on what matters most (his master's mission—to find the right bride!) **And show steadfast love to my master**. One could hardly ask for a better servant's heart! *He is selfless, totally on task*. **Behold, I am standing by the spring of water** (It is eventide and a stream of young women are pouring out of the city. If it were one of these how would he find her?!), **and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water**. Knowing that his success depends on finding the right bride, he asks for help in discernment: he asks for a visual cue (*let her bear a water jar on her shoulder*) and two audibles. Let her response to **Please let down your jar that I may drink** be: 1. **drink** and 2. **I will water your camels** (There would have been several; and they are known for being exceeding hard to satisfy with water. This was not a light chore or slight kindness—this was exceedingly kind of Rebekah to offer this stranger. She had a servant's heart, too.) —**let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac**. Note: not any comely maiden would do! Isaac's bride was appointed, not up for grabs or found by chance. **By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master**.

Now here Eleazar stops speaking to God (**speaking in his heart** means *privately*, to himself not just with sincerity). He has just finished praying. Yet **before 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**. This cue is the first thing Eleazar notices! Then he notices, **she is exceedingly beautiful**, a maiden/virgin. **She went down to the spring and filled her jar and came up** (v.16) **Then the servant ran to meet her and said, "Please give me a little to drink from your jar."** Now those of us, who are sticklers for inerrancy, the servant doesn't follow the script. He doesn't give the right cue. There is not clap of thunder, no heavenly reproof at all. Maybe a chuckle. I think God may actually chuckle when we mess up the lines that we set up! Rebekah says, **Drink, my Lord**. And, bless us, that "my Lord's" outside the script, too! However, in that slip Rebekah shows respect, or deference to this servant who has served Abraham so long and with such diligence (**he was put in charge, heir, the oldest of the household**, v.2; See Gen. 15:2—we presume this might be the same man (Eliezer of Damascus!) some nobility of character was on him. He may have worn Abraham livery, too, and cut a striking figure. He offer to water the camels is likewise, more expansive: **I will draw water for your camels also, until they have finished drinking**. Rebekah accomplishes this humble task with

speed/alacrity. And he studies her, pondering her character as seen through her actions (v.21) **When the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold ring, weighing half a shekel** (that's 2.2 tsp of pure Gold! Or .39 oz. Or, a \$500+ ring). Both pricey and dazzling! He then asks her name and discovers that God has directed him straight to Abraham's niece! Yes, singled out from a large crowd of young women *in answer to faithful prayer*. *Eleazar began to commend his master's wealth and stature with this ring and* intimated that this was part of Rebekah's bride price.

This passage bristles with points of discussion: Why does wealth matter? Well, it doesn't until fairly far into the identification process—indeed, the ring is produced as the servant signals that she's the one! Does Rebekah have to be **exceedingly beautiful**? Given that her competition is Sarah, who was breathtakingly gorgeous into her nineties, Isaac's taste, or standards were probably skewed in that direction. So there's more going on than the Miss Mesopotamia Contest!! Besides, it is the character of the girl that is studied out. It is possible that things are quite as sexist as we might be inclined to think. One might ask how anyone would know about the virginity of a candidate for marriage and it seems that such a condition was signaled by the woman's apparel. She dressed as a virgin dresses; her clothes signaled that she was marriageable (not ruined), pure not defiled. Why even bring it up? Well, given that Rebecca was the one appointed to carry the promised seed forward, her virginity was essential to the purity of that transmission—there could be no shadow on the birth certificate of Esau and Jacob. The same concerns effect the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit—no man had known Mary before she conceived the Christ. A heavenly origin was critical or his claim to be sent from heaven is discredited.

The hope that is in the word comes to us strongly in this divinely orchestrated bride question. God is in it throughout, according to the word. "We need the hope that drove Abraham to send Eleazar to the city of Nahor, to the city of Abraham's brother in the hope to find a wife for his master Isaac." I have kept my promise: here's the hope.

So let's revert to "Why do you preach the way you do?" I preach as I do because I highly value the making of a sermon. I value studying the original language and reading what ancient and historical commentators have granted us as insight. It is such a privilege to search the treasury of our past—to pick the brains of those both brighter and more skillful than I. I love learning and I yearn to pass that love on to you, my people. I write, draft, revise and rewrite my messages because it honors God and serves you well. You see well-crafted sermons and thoughtful exposition. I seek to put the truth before you week by week because the truth has convicting power. Coupled with the converting power of the Holy Spirit, I have the hope that some may even be saved by my preaching. Yes, I believe in what I am doing. But it is love that keeps me going.

Amen