

Offer Them Water

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC,
Lexington

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Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

³⁴ So he said, “I am Abraham’s servant. ³⁵ The LORD has greatly blessed my master, and he has become wealthy; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys. ³⁶ And Sarah my master’s wife bore a son to my master when she was old, and he has given him 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 live, ³⁸ but you shall go to my father’s house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son.’

⁴² “I came today to the spring and said, ‘O LORD, God of my master Abraham, if now you will only make successful the way I am going! ⁴³ I am standing here by the spring of water; let the young woman who comes out to draw, 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, there was Rebekah coming out with her water jar on her shoulder, and she went down to the spring and drew. I said to her, ‘Please let me drink.’ ⁴⁶ She quickly let down her jar from her shoulder and said, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels.’ So I drank, and she also watered the camels. 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 obtain the daughter of my master’s kinsman for his son. ⁴⁹ Now then, if you will deal loyally and truly with my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so that I may turn either to the right hand or to the left.”

⁵⁸ And they called Rebekah and said to her, “Will you go with this man?” She said, “I will.” ⁵⁹ So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham’s servant and his men. ⁶⁰ And they blessed Rebekah and said to her,

“May you, our sister, become
thousands of myriads;
may your offspring gain possession
of the gates of their foes.”

⁶¹ Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man, and the servant took Rebekah and went his way.

⁶² Now Isaac had come from^[a] Beer-lahai-roi and was settled in the Negeb. ⁶³ Isaac went out in the evening to walk^[b] in the field, and, looking up, he saw camels coming. ⁶⁴ And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel ⁶⁵ and said to the servant, “Who is the man over there, 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 his mother Sarah’s tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death.

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Beloved, turn to your neighbor and say, you’re welcome here. (Seriously.)

Can we talk about thirst for a moment?

- General

- That one day on the West highland Way when even my 3 liter camelbak ran out, I was thirsty, only for half an hour before I got to the next town, but I was thirsty.
- My friend who's walking the Spanish Camino as I write this - in the heat dome - she's been thirsty
- But none of us has known the thirst of a migrant walking across a hot desert. For decades, our neighbors on the US side of the US-Mexican border have walked out into the desert, carrying jugs of water, a tiny, lifesaving act of kindness and hospitality.

Thirst.

Beloved, turn to your neighbor and say, can I pour you a glass of water? (Right now, if they need it. But it's okay to wait until after worship - but I mean it. Pour your neighbor a glass of water.)

We have a long text this morning, suggested by the Lectionary and part of the Abraham narrative in Genesis. This morning we have scattered verses from Genesis 24, and I'll submit to you it's about thirst. And it's about giving water to a stranger, a thirsty sojourner.

Listen to selected verses from Genesis 24:

³⁴ So he said, “I am Abraham’s servant...”

Okay, the protagonist in our set of verses today does not have a name. So for our spiritual imagination, I’m giving him a name, Amos - and yes I give him this name because of the prophet Amos, we’ll get there in a minute.

Amos, Abraham’s servant, has been given a quest.

³⁴ So [Amos] said, “I am Abraham’s servant. ³⁵ The LORD has greatly blessed my master, and he has become wealthy; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys. ³⁶ And Sarah my master’s wife bore a son to my master when she was old, and he has given him 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 live, ³⁸ but you shall go to my father’s house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son.’

Now Abraham and Sarah had traveled all over the place. God sent them out of the land of their roots, and into a different land, where they’d had varying kinds of relationship with those who lived in the land of Canaan before they’d arrived. (And yes that is a year’s worth of other sermons.) But now they have grown children and one of them, Isaac, needs a wife, according to the vision

of God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah. And Abraham has sent his servant [I'm calling Amos] back to the land of their roots.

But how is [Amos] to know who the right person will be? Well, he prays about it. And his prayer is for someone who will quench his thirst, his literal thirst - traveling through the desert.

⁴² "I came today to the spring and said, 'O LORD, God of my master Abraham, if now you will only make successful the way I am going! ⁴³ I am standing here by the spring of water; let the young woman who comes out to draw, 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.'

The woman who offers him water will be the right person.

We turn to our neighbor and say, neighbor, can I pour you a glass of water?

The text continues, in [Amos'] voice,

⁵ "Before I had finished speaking in my heart, there was Rebekah coming out with her water jar on her shoulder, and she went down to the spring and drew. I said to her, 'Please let me drink.' ⁴⁶ She quickly let down her jar from

her shoulder and said, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels.' So I drank, and she also watered the camels.

[Amos] knows this is the person he's been seeking because she gives him water, quickly, cheerfully, and not just water for him but probably also for the folks he's traveling with, and we know there are folks he's traveling with because you wouldn't travel so far alone through the desert, and we also know it because there are a *bunch* of camels involved, And just for the record, do you know how much water camels drink? So Rebekah is kind, and welcoming, and she's patient (mime the bucket going up and down the well), and she's strong because that bucket is going down into the well and back up again for a while.

[Amos] picks Rebekah because she is kind to the stranger, the foreigner, the sojourner, the traveler, the thirsty alien in her land.

And so the text continues,

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 obtain the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son. ⁴⁹ Now then,

if you will deal loyally and truly with my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so that I may turn either to the right hand or to the left.”

We’ve got a few more verses left here....Rebekah’s brother gets involved next.

⁵⁸ And [her brother and family] called Rebekah and said to her, “Will you go with this man?” She said, “I will.”

Let me just say how exciting it is to read about *consent* in the Bible.

⁵⁹ So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham’s servant and his men. ⁶⁰ And they blessed Rebekah and said to her,

*“May you, our sister, become
thousands of myriads;
may your offspring gain possession
of the gates of their foes.”*

⁶¹ Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man, and the servant [Amos] took Rebekah and went his way.

⁶² Now Isaac had come from^[a] Beer-lahai-roi and was settled in the Negeb. ⁶³ Isaac went out in the evening to walk^[b] in the field, and, looking up, he saw camels coming.

⁶⁴ And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel

Just so you know, the Hebrew here says Rebekah *fell off her camel* when she saw Isaac.

⁶⁵ and [Rebekah] said to the servant, “Who is the man over there, 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 his mother Sarah’s tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death.

So this part of the story, this chapter of Genesis ends well for Isaac and Rebekah - and also for Abraham’s servant whom I’m calling Amos. And we’re going to let them have their happy ending, okay?

But I want to stick with what Amos saw in Rebekah. It is so powerful to me that Amos knew the right person would offer water to thirsty people. And I don’t think we can call that random, because the Bible is a story of people who live in dry lands, and the Bible tells us over and again that it is righteous to offer water to thirsty people. This is a thing people do for each other, and this is a thing God does for the people.

Nehemiah 9, You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst

Isaiah 55, Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.

When we get to the Christian testament we know Jesus encounters a woman who offers him water; he becomes living water to others, and he says, “If anyone thirsts, let them come to me and drink.”

And we can call this metaphor all we want but I suggest to you that offering water to your thirsty neighbor, offering water to the stranger and foreigner among you, tending to the real, physical needs of our fellow human beings is counted as righteousness in God’s eyes. Offering water in the desert is offering kindness, hospitality, welcome.

God accounts it as righteousness to quench the thirst of neighbor and stranger, kin and traveler.

So [Amos] knew Rebekah was the one he searched for, because she offered water, kindness, hospitality, welcome to the stranger. Maybe the principle that the people will codify just a few years later is on his heart:

“When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do them wrong. 34 You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall

*love them as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." **Leviticus 19:33-34 (ESV)***

When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do them wrong.

Pilgrims I've got the US on my mind this morning. We've celebrated the 250th anniversary of our country this weekend. We have such a strong history of building up this country by welcoming the stranger, by saying to our new neighbors, neighbor, can I pour you a glass of water? Most of us in this room, our ancestors at some point were offered water when they were new here.

And we also have a complicated history, waves of time from colonial days when our ancestors displaced those who first lived on this land, folks who had offered us water. Waves of time through the various anti-immigration phases of US history. No Chinese, no Irish...

We're in another such wave. In the last weeks we've seen Supreme Court rulings that say to the stranger and foreigner among us, turn around. Haitians and Syrians, no more TPS. You're not welcome here. We will not offer you water from our well.

This weekend as we celebrate this milestone national birthday, I suggest that we go back to the well. Find ways to offer water to our thirsty neighbors. Call this country

back to the righteousness of welcome, hospitality, compassion, kindness to the stranger and foreigner among us.

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

While the fireworks may be bright this weekend we are not yet where we need to be. “America’s aspiration to be “a more perfect Union,” one that still has miles to go when it comes to equality, justice, peace, and general welfare.” (Lori Walke, Illustrated Ministry)

We’re going to sing America the Beautiful in a few minutes. In that song Katherine Lee Bates does not only praise the US, but calls us to righteousness. Early in her life she worked in settlement houses, with poor immigrants, and I have to think crowning our good with brotherhood has something to do with welcoming, with quenching the thirst of new neighbors.

There are a lot of thirsty people in this world, and we’re standing at a well spring, bucket in hand. Like the prophet Amos, we must cry out for justice to rain down like waters; like Rebekah we must fill each other’s cups.

Beloved, turn to your neighbor

not your neighbor in the next chair -

your neighbor, the sojourner amongst us,

beloved, turn to your neighbor

and say, can I pour you a glass of water? Amen.