

HOW NOT TO MAKE A GOOD FIRST IMPRESSION
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
Columbia, Tennessee
July 6, 2008

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

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are referred to as the patriarchs of Israel. This summer the lectionary is leading us through the stories of the patriarchs as found in Genesis. Today we come to the story that might be entitled: How Isaac Married Rebekah.

The story, though, is not much about Isaac and Rebekah, but about the servant and Rebekah. This servant had been sent by old Abraham to find a bride for young Isaac. So it is the servant who first identifies Rebekah; it is the servant who talks to the family about letting her be Isaac's wife; it is the servant who persuades Rebekah to return to Canaan as the bride of Isaac.

Finally, at the end of this fairly long story, Rebekah sees her prospective groom for the first time. It says that Isaac had gone out in the evening "to walk in the field." But there's a problem with that phrase. Check your pew Bible—not now, but later—and you'll see that there's a footnote with that word "walk." It says that the meaning of the Hebrew word is uncertain. "Walk" is really a translator's guess. No one is exactly sure what that word means, and there has been all sorts of speculation about it.

I read an article recently by a Jewish scholar, who is an expert in the Hebrew language.¹ And he concludes that the sentence means that Isaac had gone out into the field to answer a call of nature. He was going to the bathroom (and I don't think I have ever used that phrase in a sermon). That is Rebekah's first view of her new husband. Not exactly a good first impression!

¹ Joel S. Kaminsky, "Humor and the Theology of Hope: Isaac as a Humorous Figure." *Interpretation*, October 2000, pp. 369-70.

The text says that Rebekah “slipped quickly from her camel.” But this same article says that what is really meant is that Rebekah was so startled by the sight of Isaac in, shall we say, a compromising position, that she just fell right off her camel. What we’ve got here is less like the Holy Bible and more like the Three Stooges!

Then there is one more strange detail. When Isaac and Rebekah are finally properly introduced, and when Rebekah agrees to be his wife, Isaac takes her for their wedding night to the tent formerly occupied by Isaac’s poor deceased mother Sarah. “Rebekah, honey, you don’t mind that big picture of mother over the bed, do you?”

Isaac, let us agree, is a strange character, the sort of person whose bread always falls to the floor jelly-side down. I think Adam Sandler ought to play him in the movie version. No wonder old father Abraham had entrusted a servant with the task of finding Isaac a wife. He knew that Isaac wouldn’t be able to do it himself.

We can wonder why such a story was included. This is not a very dignified portrayal of the great patriarch. It sounds like the sort of things that happen, well, to us. We have our own stories about our lives, about romantic encounters and entanglements, some of them good and some painful, some where we come off looking good and some where the impression we make, whether the first or the thousandth impression, is not very good.

Our own lives are not always very dignified. We try to look cool and composed and under control. But we know how often our personal lives and our families are anything but under control. As the saying has it, we put the “fun” in dysfunctional. That’s the sort of story we have here.

In fact, if you took this story out of the Bible and let it stand as an independent short story, and if you took out the references to God, it would be a right interesting secular story not too different in some ways from the routine and sometimes strange things that happen to us.

But the Bible doesn’t leave God out. In fact, the people in this story are absolutely clear that God is present in the entire event. Abraham’s servant uses words that are full of references to God. “God led me . . . O Lord, guide me in the right way.” There is a basic assumption in this story, and that is that God is leading and guiding and directing every moment of what happens. Was that a chance meeting of the servant with Rebekah? No, it was the leading of God. Was her decision to leave her family one that she made all by herself? No, God was guiding her thoughts and motives. Even the undignified

encounter with Isaac, God was there. All the foolishness, all the buffoonery, and God is nevertheless there, moving toward the purposes of the Lord.

It is not that God is all that active in intervening in what happens. There are no dramatic miracles here, no bolt from the blue. People meet and talk and agree and haggle just like people have always done. The difference is the underlying assumption: God is directing it all.

So let's assume that as well. Here are our lives, where we are sometimes sharp and savvy, but more often where we come off as klutzy and comical, where our lives sometimes have dramatic things happen in them, but most days we're just going along, dealing with the events and people that come our way. Let's just assume what is so easy to forget, that at every moment the one who is there, leading and guiding, is God. It is true in the religious and pious times, and also the times when we look sort of foolish.

Many years ago I got a phone call from a member of a family that belonged to the church I was serving at the time. An elderly family member was sick and near death. Could I drive up to the hospital to see them? I agreed, and headed to the hospital in the big city. Along the way I stopped off and got a chocolate ice cream cone, and thus fortified, continued on my way.

I arrived and found the family gathered at the bedside of this one who was sick. We had a good visit, and if I do say so, I was especially at my best: my words were comforting, my responses pastoral, my manner gentle. I could tell in their faces how much my compassion meant to them.

So I concluded my visit with a prayer and left to return home. I went out to the car and adjusted the rear-view mirror, and noticed that at the corner of my mouth was a little dollop of chocolate from that earlier ice cream cone. I had not been quite as dignified as I had supposed, and the expression of the family I took for gratitude was actually pity that I should show up in such a state.

You've got stories like that too, times when you thought you were looking good but actually had chocolate all over your face, times when you have felt religious and doing the will of God but actually came off looking like a fool. Not far from Isaac caught with his pants down in that field. Here is what the scripture affirms: God is present in those times just as much, maybe more, than in the times when we are feeling especially pious and religious.

It may even be that we can propose a rule for Christian behavior. Call it the Pious Paradox. It goes like this: If you are feeling especially impressed with your spiritual feelings, if you think you are acting in a way that especially pleases God, if you think you are in a particularly religious frame, beware: You may be impressing yourself, but not God. On the other hand, you feel distant from God, and wonder if there's anything to your prayers, and feel like you're not sure about this religion business at all, then look up: It may be that God is nearer just in that time than any other.

The Tennessean newspaper carried an article earlier this week about recent polls that asked about people's religious life. It found that in Tennessee the vast majority of people claim to pray regularly, and by far a majority say they pray at least once a day. But when it asked how often God answers their prayers, the numbers dropped way down. No, seemed to be the consensus, God doesn't very often answer my prayers.

We might ask: How do they know? It may be true that their prayer was not answered just in the way they prayed it. "God once again did not give me a pony." But who is to say how God answers our prayers? Might it not be that God comes and acts and answers in ways that are totally unexpected, totally beyond anything we looked for. God is present in all of it—the times when we pray and the times when we don't know how to pray, the times when the prayer is answered and the times when the heavens stay firmly shut, the times when we are feeling religious and the times when we feel foolish. Let the assumption of scripture be the assumption of our lives: God is the one who is leading.

Maybe the reason why they kept this story of Isaac and Rebekah in the Bible was to remind themselves and us that we humans never look more foolish than when we try to take ourselves too seriously, and to remind us that the one who is in charge is not us, but God. †