

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

July 5, 2020

Gathering

Liturgist: Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will soon find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.
Matthew 11: 28-30

Solo: 665 "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say"

I heard the voice of Jesus say, "Come unto me and rest; lay down, O weary one, lay down your head upon my breast." I came to Jesus as I was, so weary, worn, and sad; I found in him a resting place, and he has made me glad.

I heard the voice of Jesus say, "Behold, I freely give the living water; thirsty one, stoop down and drink and live." I came to Jesus, and I drank of that life-giving stream; my thirst was quenched, my soul revived, and now I live in him.

I heard the voice of Jesus say, "I am this dark world's light; look unto me; your morn shall rise and all your day be bright." I looked to Jesus, and I found in him my star, my sun; and in that light of life I'll walk till traveling days are done.

Minister: May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. Amen.
2 Peter: 1:2 NRSV

Reconciliation

Liturgist: I don't understand what I do. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil that I don't want to do – this I keep on doing.

Liturgist: Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

Liturgist: So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin within me.
Romans 7: 15, 18-23

Singing: 627 "Just as I Am, Without One Plea"

Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, and that thou bidd'st me come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings and fears within, without, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, thou wilt receive, wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
because thy promise I believe, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, thy love unknown has broken every barrier down; now to be
thine, yea, thine alone, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Liturgist: Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Liturgist: Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ! For there is now
no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Romans 7:24 – 8:1

Singing: 770 “In Christ Alone”

In Christ alone my hope is found; he is my light, my strength, my song—this
cornerstone, this solid ground, firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of love, what depths of peace, when fears are stilled when
strivings cease. My comforter, my all in all, here in the love of Christ I stand.

In Christ alone, who took on flesh—fulness of God in helpless babe! this gift
of love and righteousness, scorned by the ones he came to save. ‘Til on
the cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied. For every sin on
him was laid; here in the death of Christ I live.

There in the ground his body lay, light of the world by darkness slain; then,
bursting forth in glorious day, up from the grave he rose again! And as he
stands in victory, sin’s curse has lost its grip on me; for I am his and he is
mine, bought with the precious blood of Christ.

Not guilt in life, no fear in death, this is the power of Christ in me; from life’s
first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny. No power of hell, no
human plan, can ever pluck me from his hand; ‘til he returns or calls me
home, here in the power of Christ I’ll stand!

Proclamation

Minister: Lord God, let the words of your servant’s mouth and the meditations of our
hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer. Through
Christ. Amen. *Psalms 19:14 NRSV*

Scripture: Genesis 24: 1-21, 62-67

Sermon: “God’s Domestique”

Singing: 904 “Lord, Make Us Servants”

Lord, make us servants of your peace: where there is hate,
may we sow love; where there is hurt, may we forgive;
where there is strife, may we make one.

Where all is doubt, may we sow faith; where all is gloom,
may we sow hope; where all is night, may we sow light;
where all is tears, may we sow joy.

Jesus, our Lord, may we not seek to be consoled, but to console,
nor look to understanding hearts, but look for hearts to understand.

May we not look for love's return but seek to love unselfishly,
for in our giving we receive, and in forgiving are forgiven.

Dying, we live, and are reborn through death's dark door to endless day;
Lord, make us servants of your peace to wake at last in heaven's light.

Dedication

Prayer

Benediction

Singing: "The Day of the Lord (Psalm 37)"

It's not long till the boastful are silenced and shamed.
It's not long till the wealth of the wicked's reclaimed.
And the ones who have waited with eyes on the Lord
will shine like the sun forevermore.
It's not long till the Day of the Lord.

Just be still and be faithful and dwell in the land.
Put your trust in the Savior and cling to his hand.
When your heart burns with anger for all that is wrong,
do not let the dark steal your song.
It's not long till the Day of the Lord.

*It's not long till the Day of the Lord,
It's not long till the Day of the Lord,
Everything that is broken will soon be restored.
It's not long till the Day of the Lord!*

Do not fear for the wicked with weapons of war,
for the Lord is the shelter and strength of the poor.
And our God comes with laughter; let him be your joy.
The power of the sword, he'll destroy.
It's not long till the Day of the Lord!

Worship Leaders

Pianist/Vocalist:	Erin Pacheco
Cello/Vocalist:	Addie Larsen
Liturgist:	Debbie Larsen
Tambourine/Liturgist/Prayer:	Beatrix Larsen
Minister:	Roger Nelson
Sound Engineer:	Schuyler Roozeboom

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Text: Genesis 24: 1-21, 62-67
Title: God's Domestique
Date: 07.05.20
Roger Allen Nelson

If not for the coronavirus this weekend would have been the start of the Tour de France. Just under 200 cyclists would be racing just over 2000 miles in just over 20 days. They would be riding through the gently rolling hills of wine country, over the French Alps and the Pyrenees, and finally down the Champs-Elysees.

While there is only one winner, the Tour de France is actually raced as teams. You don't win alone – you need the support of your team. You need domestiques (French for servants). For every mile and every stage, over every mountain and through every valley, team leaders are surrounded by domestiques.

Domestiques don't get the accolades.

They don't win the medals.

They don't make the money.

They ride in service to the team leader.

They shield him from the wind, they protect him from danger, they carry food and drink. If the leader flats they give up their wheels; if the leader struggles they tow him along. They pull him up the mountains and they put him in position to win at the end. For the most part domestiques are faceless-nameless servants who faithfully do their part – grunts to the cycling gods. You don't win without domestiques. They are at the center of the Tour de France.

At the center of the longest chapter in Genesis there is a faceless-nameless domestique. In the middle of the divine/human drama of God and Abraham there is an anonymous servant.

Consider...

There is very little in this text about what God does. There is no spectacle of God breaking in and hammering out a covenant; there is no miraculous birth to a barren womb. This is not a story of plagues and floods or arcs and exodus. Rather, it's a delightful human story - sort of the romantic comedy of Genesis.

Sarah was dead, and if you do the biblical math, Isaac was about 40. Abraham is not long for this world either, and while God made Isaac the first installment on his covenant promise, there is little evidence that Isaac is doing his part for the next chapter. So, Abraham sends a domestique back to the old country to insure that Isaac has an acceptable bride.

The covenant promise is about place and progeny, and as one scholar puts it, in circumcision "the male organ of generation" bears the sign of that covenant. Abraham commands his servant to swear an oath by grabbing his genitals. *Put your hand under my thigh* – is a delicate euphemism.

But the oath also symbolizes, once again, the promise of procreation. This narrative nudges along the fulfillment of God's promise of descendants through the promise of a domestique.

So, the servant travels with a dowry – camels, gold, and gifts – and with a desire to do right by Abraham, and having no idea how to determine an appropriate bride, the servant prays-up a test for the first woman at the watering hole to show kindness not just to him – but to the camels as well.

And before he can close his prayer there stands Princess Buttercup, I mean Rebekah, in the late afternoon sun – beautiful, a virgin, and generous of spirit. The servant is smitten. He asks for a sip; she gives a big gulp and offers to water the camels. One biblical scholar offers this summary:

...an average camel drinks about 106 liters of water. Ten camels means 1060 liters of water. If you use a 20 liter pail that means 53 pails of water. An average well had 50 steps down into the water. Those are small steps built into the wall of the well. Imagine you have to carry a pail down 50 steps, scoop up 20 liters of water, walk up 50 steps out of the well, and do it 53 times....

Now. I don't know about all those averages, but the narrative is clear that whatever Rebekah was doing, she was doing with haste. In four short verses Rebekah is the subject of eleven verbs of action and one of speech. She is "a continuous whirlwind of purposeful activity." (Just what you want in a wife....)

She is running, fetching, fixing, offering a place for the servant and his entourage, and eventually she leaves behind kith and kin to join dashing and gallant Isaac – who is stopped dead in his tracks when he sees his bride-to-be coming across fields of golden grain....

She demurely veils her face.

He helps her from her camel, sweeping her off her feet.

Cue the violins!

And the domestique looks on with a knowing smile as the sun sets over Sarah's tent. The covenant is intact!

That, dear friends, is a charming story worthy of the Hallmark channel. It relishes in the details of how people are connected, how love flourishes, and how God's promise to Abraham is fulfilled - one more link in the line from Abraham to Jacob to David to Jesus to you and me.

So, what are we to make of it?

What are we to make of this biblical story of beauty and betrothal?

Walter Brueggemann writes that this is a “secular” story. God is not breaking in to speak. God is not making promises or giving commandments. There is no direct discernable divine direction. There’s an oath, a petition, and a prayer of thanksgiving directed toward God, but this is not a story of intervention, interruption, or instruction.

I guess you could see God as a matchmaker. You could trace God’s finger pushing Rebekah and Isaac together – working out the details of thirsty camels and willing hearts. And there is a sort of religious romanticism to which that appeals....

In fact, in a rabbinical midrash there is an exchange between a Rabbi and a Roman woman considering that kind of possibility. Listen to this:

Rabbi Yose bar Halafta was asked by a Roman matron, “You claim that your God created the world in six days. Then what has He been doing since then?”

“All this time the Holy One has been making matches.”

“That is no great feat!” declared the matron. “I can do that just as well.”

But Rabbi Yose warned her: “It is not as simple as you think. The Holy One, blessed be He, considers making matches as difficult as splitting the Red Sea.”

What if God is busy making matches? As Diane Roth puts it:

What if that is, in fact, the only way that God transforms the world—through matchmaking, which is to say, through human relationships? Since creation, God has been arranging meetings, bringing people together—not just so that they will have a nice life, but for larger, mysterious purposes. For the flourishing of the world and the advancement of God’s purposes.

I like that. The currency of relationships serve a greater purpose – the reclaiming of *shalom*, the working of out of God’s will in this world. May we see all our relationships with that same sense of holy attention and intention.

But, I want to go back to the domestique....

He was the senior servant, the top domestique, of Abraham’s household in Canaan. And chances are that he would been of some other tribe, of some other people, with some other gods. And yet, in this unfolding story of redemption he does the helpful thing, the needful thing, the faithful thing. He doesn’t seek glory or stand on the podium. He doesn’t demand attention or seek accolades. But, he plays his role.

We are often seduced into believing that our lives are to be dramatic adventures for God and self. In our context we easily expect that if we’re not doing something substantial and successful there must be something wrong with us....

And yet, the way of God is not always spectacular, powerful, or dramatic. Sometimes it's just faithful servants who do the simple thing, the human thing, the obedient thing, the needful thing.

Dear friends, the way of God doesn't always come with success and acclaim, sometimes it comes slowly, gently, quietly. The Kingdom of God doesn't come with sweeping force, sometimes it is built relationship by relationship.

It is difficult to be too precise or positive about how God is orchestrating events or working out his will. The story of God's will is better told looking in the rear view mirror than squinting through the windshield. So, maybe this text is a reminder of the "hidden, inscrutable, guidance of God." It resists the religious romanticism of God steering us to parking places and promotions on the one hand, and on the other hand, the callous cynicism that we are alone and adrift without guidance.

Maybe this passage is a reminder to prayerfully, humbly, do the needful thing – while trusting that God is present. Maybe all we're asked to be are domestiques – trying to live in a God-ward way.

You know, this is the only occasion in Genesis where the term *nahah* (lead) is used. *Nahah* usually refers to guidance in the wilderness or a kind of personal well-being in a time of stress. The best known is Psalm 23:

*He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness, for his name sake.*

But, in Genesis 24 *nahah* is used to describe this series of events. In the words of domestique:

Praise be to the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master. As for me, the Lord led me on the journey...

Dear friends, today may you be encouraged that God is leading. May you be encouraged that God is working out his will even as you are faithful as friend and father, teacher and child, caregiver and grandparent, servant and spouse. May we hear from God,

Well done, good and faithful servant.

Amen.