



## “Following Rebekah”

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*Genesis 24:34-67*

There was a time in the not so distant past that I was preparing for an interview and I really wanted to wear something new and different; something that I hadn't worn to work dozens of times before. The thing is, this interview popped up so suddenly there was no way I would have time to shop for a new outfit. My thoughtful husband, Spencer, found inspiration for well put together interview outfits and lovingly offered to shop for one on my behalf since he had some free time that week. I lamented about how difficult it is to shop for women's clothing because one size in one brand of clothing could be a completely different size in another brand, and if I wasn't there to try stuff on, the result could be less than ideal. In the end, I decided to take him up on his offer to see what could happen. Spencer got me the cutest pencil skirt (that actually fit!) as well as a really pretty orange blouse. I could wear the skirt to the interview, but I couldn't wear the pretty top as there were two intentionally placed gaping holes on each of the arms. I was able to piece something together with the skirt and thanked Spencer for his tremendous effort.

It can be really difficult to be sent out to do something for someone else. Even if you have a list there is always room for error. It could be something like going to pick up food from a grocery store or a skirt for an interview. Things can get a little trickier, though, when you are sent as a representative for someone else. When you are a representative, you are a reflection of the one who sends you.

Between last week's text and this week's, Sarah had died and Abraham had found and purchased a family plot ensuring their presence in this land God had promised him and led him to. God, all the way back in Genesis 12, made a promise to Abraham. God told him that if he went from his country and his family to a new land, the land that God would show him, a great nation would be made of Abraham. God reminded Abraham of this promise after Abraham nearly sacrificed Isaac, stating that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and as grains of sand. Abraham, at this point a hundred and forty years old, took it upon himself to find a way to continue the fulfillment of God's promise. This is the first time that we don't see God speaking directly to Abraham.

Abraham asked his most senior servant to find a wife for Isaac. The servant was chosen to be a representative for Abraham, to be a reflection of his faith and of his wealth, or as interpreted at that time, of the blessings that God had bestowed on him. So, Abraham sent his servant back to his home and family to find Isaac a wife, to continue to fulfill the promises he'd heard spoken to him again and again. Abraham trusted in God and in God's promises. God had protected and provided for Abraham and his family before—there was the well for Hagar and Ishmael and the

ram for sacrifice in place of Isaac. Abraham trusted that an angel of the Lord would go before the servant and prepare a way.

The servant was sent away with ten camels and many, many lavish and expensive gifts. He traveled four hundred miles to just outside the city of Nahor and arrived in the evening time. He stopped by a well, where he knew women would come to draw water. The servant took time to pray for guidance here. This was a weighty task he'd been given. He prayed for God's steadfast love and faithfulness toward Abraham to continue to make itself known through this task. He asked for specific signs: that the girl whom he requested a drink would provide it and also offer to water the camels.

Before he is even finished offering this prayer, here comes Rebekah. Her very appearance stopped the servant mid-sentence. Rebekah was beautiful. And here is something surprising—God made the star of this story someone you wouldn't expect. The star is not the servant, though he did good and important work here, too. The star is not Abraham. The star is not Isaac. The star is Rebekah. From the moment Rebekah enters the scene, she gently demands that we pay attention to her. Her beauty may have been the initial draw but we quickly realize that she is much more than that. Additionally, we recognize there is much we can learn from Rebekah. As the story continues, we can learn from Rebekah two things: what it means to show gracious hospitality and what it means to have great courage.

Getting back to the story: there is something about Rebekah that struck the servant and he decided to move toward her to make his request of her. It was pretty much expected during these times that one would show hospitality to strangers and travelers. So when the servant said to Rebekah, "Please let me sip a little water from your jar," Rebekah moved quickly and provided it for him. She waited until after the servant had all he needed to drink before she offered, "I will draw for your camels also, until they have finished drinking." She not only offered to draw water for the camels—she would draw for them until their thirst had been quenched, too. Do you know how much a thirsty camel can drink? One camel can drink up to thirty gallons of water! Rebekah's jar could probably hold no more than three gallons.

Rebekah goes about fulfilling this superhuman task of providing ten incredibly thirsty camels water, running down to the well, drawing water, running up to the trough, emptying her jar, and repeating numerous times. How many trips did she have to make to provide nearly 300 gallons of water? How many weeks of Camp Gladiator prepared her to accomplish this feat? The servant gazed in wonder at Rebekah. He wondered to himself if God was answering his prayers. Had the Lord granted him a successful journey?

When Rebekah had finished and the servant and camels had been well cared for, the servant placed a gold nose-ring and two bracelets on her. He didn't even know anything about her! In fact, he placed this jewelry on her before he asked about her family. When the servant did ask about her family and if there was room for them to spend the night, Rebekah responded with something greater than the servant or Abraham could have hoped for: she was not simply from Abraham's clan as was dictated to the servant to find. She was the closest relative to Isaac. He found the granddaughter of Abraham's brother. Rebekah was Isaac's cousin. And she added that there was plenty of straw and fodder for the camels, and room for the servant to spend the night.

The servant was overjoyed and full of gratitude for the way in which God had led and provided during this journey. He praised God for not abandoning God's steadfast love and faithfulness to Abraham. Rebekah ran back home to share with her family what had taken place. Rebekah's gracious and generous hospitality is reminiscent of the kind of hospitality we've seen before; namely, Abraham's hospitality to the three strangers who turned out to be angels of the Lord.

Spencer shared with me his experience at youth camp last month. He was moved by our church's youth and the spirit with which they provided care for the people whose homes they cleaned up as part of their week's mission. For one reason or another, these people were unable to rid this junk themselves and the youth, so I'm told, were joyful and kind and moved quickly to provide care and fill this need.

Last Sunday, a group called In Solidarity held a picnic for refugee families to celebrate Eid, a holiday that marks the end of Ramadan, a holy month of fasting in the Islamic tradition. This was an opportunity for neighbors to break bread together, to meet and get to know one another, and to play together, an opportunity for refugees to feel welcomed in this new land they now call 'home.' These two groups are examples of what it means to provide a safe, welcoming, and hospitable space for people who were total strangers, who otherwise would go unseen or unnoticed.

Not only was Rebekah hospitable, she was also courageous. After Rebekah ran home to share with her family all that had transpired, her brother, Laban, welcomed the servant into their home. The servant recounted his experience: the oath Abraham made him swear to, the prayers he prayed, his encounter with Rebekah. The servant recognized this meeting as a meeting that came from the Lord. And when he had finished speaking, Rebekah's father and Laban recognized it as such, too. They said to the servant: "The thing comes from the LORD; we cannot speak to you anything bad or good. Look, Rebekah is before you, take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son, as the LORD has spoken."

All seemed well and it appeared that the servant's journey would ultimately be successful until the next morning, when Laban and Rebekah's mother suggested that Rebekah remain with them for a while, for at least ten days. After that, she could go. The servant, recognizing the importance of a timely return, took a stance and told them not to delay his and Rebekah's departure. Laban and Rebekah's mother called for Rebekah to ask her directly. The question was not whether she wanted to marry Isaac or not; that had already been decided. The question was, would she go with the servant to Isaac now or wait a little while. It is surprising that Rebekah was given this choice. What is more surprising is Rebekah's response to the question.

Rebekah only knew of Isaac and his family what she heard from the servant. God did not speak directly to her. She had not met or seen Isaac. She was making the choice to leave behind all she knew—her family, her home, her friends. But Rebekah discerned this was where she was being called to. It was an act of courage and faith in God for Rebekah to leave immediately with the servant rather than to prolong their departure and to risk years rather than days before leaving, as Laban would do to Jacob years later. Rebekah didn't know what to expect when she met Isaac, didn't know how important her role would be to the fulfillment of God's promises. She simply knew that this was her next step and took it.

Rebekah was given a blessing as she prepared to go, similar to the blessing Abraham received after his near-sacrifice of Isaac: “Our sister, may you increase to thousands upon thousands; may your offspring possess the cities of their enemies.” This blessing and Rebekah’s marriage to Isaac situated Rebekah as the next matriarch of the family, thus continuing the movement toward fulfilling God’s promise.

We can’t anticipate how God will move in our lives, but we can be sensitive to God’s leadership. Through the lens of faith, we can look back retrospectively and acknowledge those times when God was present. This is one of the ways we can make meaning of our stories within the grand narrative of God’s redemptive work in the world.

One of the ways this manifested in my life was through my decision to pursue education at Truett Seminary at Baylor. I wanted to go to Brite Divinity School, and almost did despite an acceptance letter and scholarship to Truett. My mentor’s jaw nearly dropped when I told him I still wanted to go to Brite and he kindly requested that I at least go and visit Truett first. He said that if I still felt that way after visiting, then at least I would know what I was saying ‘no’ to. Reluctantly, I agreed. I had personal reasons for wanting to attend Brite. But to my excitement, when I stepped foot into the halls of Truett, I knew that was where God was calling me to. I didn’t know what my time there would hold for me, but I trusted this was my next step. And looking back from this point, I am grateful for the community, for the education, for the opportunities, for the challenges, and for the transformation that took place. I am grateful for the places where God met me during my four years there.

So, what can Rebekah teach us today? What does it mean for us to follow Rebekah’s examples of hospitality and courage? To be hospitable is to be generous and loving. Hospitality is a disposition one assumes. It is as simple as sharing cotton candy grapes with the cashier at a grocery store who was having a bad day, and seeing a smile spread across his face upon discovering the magic of said grapes and experiencing the kindness of strangers. It is as important as being willing to hold space for someone who is having a difficult time and needs someone to hear them and see the struggles they are experiencing. It is asking them how they are doing *today* and being genuinely concerned to take time to hear their honest responses.

To have courage is to be willing to move forward when you don’t have all the answers. It is trust that you have all you need to take the next step and that you will be given what you need as your journey continues to unfold. It is looking back and remembering the situations and places God brought you through to help inform you of where you are today.

To follow Rebekah is to see, to provide, to trust. May we see those around us who celebrate and who grieve. May we provide a safe space for people to be vulnerable and authentically themselves. May we trust God to walk alongside of us, even in the midst of our doubts and uncertainties.

Amen.