

Ordinary Blessing - Sermon Based on Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67
by David Hindman on Sunday, July 3, 2011

A year ago I stood before you as your pastor for the first time. At a certain point in the 11 a.m. service I admitted I had no idea what I was supposed to do next. Some of you may still think I don't know what I'm doing.

When we worshiped together that first time I offered a recipe for healing our faith family. It was nothing dramatic or spectacular – just seven simple ingredients to improve our life together. I hope they're posted somewhere in your home to remind you regularly of things we can do to become the confection God longs for us to be. For old times' sake or new folks, it's in our bulletin again today. Remember your baptism. Pray. Daily Bible study and devotions. Worship and celebrate communion. Be generous. Confront, confess and forgive each other. Build up and encourage one another. God's grace and your commitment are making us a healthier community of Christ followers, thanks be to God.

Today's story from Genesis brought that first Sunday to mind for me again. It's not an especially dramatic story. There're no profound revelations or aha moments. Just ordinary folks doing ordinary things. And yet blessing happens.

It's a time of change and transition. Abraham's wife Sarah has died; Abraham knows his days are numbered, too. God's kept promises to Abraham of blessings and wealth and children, but he's still wandering without the promised

land received. Will the promise continue to a new generation? Will blessing come to Isaac, too? Now Abraham wants to find a wife for Isaac. So he gives that matchmaking job to a trusted servant with very specific instructions. First, Isaac will not return to the old country, to Abraham's homeland. They've come this far by faith; there'll be no U-Turn to the old ways and beliefs, the old life left behind. A good lesson for us who follow Christ and live a new life through him: no turning back for us, either.

Abraham also doesn't want a daughter-in-law from the people among whom they now live. He knows there's something distinctive about this faith journey they travel. He won't blend that new life with the ways of those around him. It'd be so easy to compromise. Become part of Canaan's melting pot. Fit in. But Abraham sees there's something remarkable about his relationship with God; he won't risk diluting it for convenience sake. A good lesson for us who follow Christ and live a new life through him: in St. Paul's words to the Romans, don't let the world squeeze us into its own mold but to let God remold us from within. We're to stand out as God's own, like red against a blue background, like light shining in the dark.

So Abraham's servant goes on this ancient match.com search back to Abraham's hometown. And as he pulls into town, he paused to pray for God's guidance and trusts that God is willing and able to meet his need.

Sure enough he says “Amen” and Rebekah shows up. She graciously gives him a cold drink and then waters his camels. Of all the women who could’ve come to this Old Testament singles bar, she’s literally an answer to prayer. Soon Rebekah’s wearing a new gold nose ring and gold arm bands and racing to tell her family about her great good fortune. Quickly family members return to the servant to invite him home for supper. The story’s retold, more goods and gifts are lavished on the family and before you know it, Rebekah’s on a camel heading to a new life in a new land and Isaac. In the end they fall for each other and the blessing continues.

What makes the story remarkable is how unremarkable it is. Each person has a role to play for blessing to happen. And at numerous places the tale could come unraveled. Instead of hoarding blessings without a care for the next generation, Abraham knows its time for him to go. The story’s *not* all about him. A good lesson for us older folks: how can we support and nurture the faith of a new generation and let go of having our way all the time? The servant could’ve run off with the money to start his own new life. But he does his master’s will with absolutely no payoff for himself because that’s what you do when you belong to someone else. A good lesson for us who serve Christ: doing God’s will is not about what’s in it for us. It’s what’s expected when we serve another Lord and master. Rebekah could’ve played it safe and stayed home. But the adventures she

would've missed and the love she would've lost. The family could've pressured her by saying that the familiar is preferable to leaping into a future not yet seen. A good lesson for us who serve Christ: faith involves mystery and uncertainty and risk. Sometimes leaving family and friends happens if we're God's person 100%. And Isaac could've tried to control things or decide himself how he wanted his life to unfold. But he trusted that the God who gave him life and spared his life was working to bring love and life and comfort that Isaac could not give himself. A good lesson for us who serve Christ: trust that God has nothing but good in mind for us. Always. Everywhere.

They all play a part in this story of blessing and hope and life with a future. No heroes or prima donnas, just ordinary folks doing ordinary things. But each one needed. A good lesson for us in this rather ordinary faith community as we experience exceptional grace and life and joy and peace. Each of us matters. Each of us is needed. God can work through us all.

Don't miss the crucial role of prayer in the story. The servant offers a prayer and is completely open to what God might do and God answers the prayer with remarkable blessing. A good lesson for us who follow Christ: remember that prayer makes a difference. It's not to be done perfunctorily or simply to begin and end meetings or by the preacher because I get paid to do it. Prayer's a conduit connecting us to God's power and wisdom to discern God's ways in our ordinary

everyday life. And when we pray truly and fervently answers come through each other, ideas and insights and dreams, and through people God puts in our paths if we pay attention.

We might see all this as mere coincidence, chance occurrence, sheer luck. But with faith's eyes God is seen at work doing remarkable things, putting people and opportunities and moments of grace in our path, making blessing real, and transforming the world for good. Perhaps you've had those God-incidents: you pray for guidance and then find yourself traveling a path you didn't plan or even imagine existed. In my own life I'm absolutely convinced that seemingly chance, off-hand remarks joined to prayerful openness to God's will resulted in a grace-filled marriage, unimagined mission encounters near and far, and at least an appointment or two that started as surprises but ended being remarkably blessed. Last week Dr. Tom Hubbard met with some of us to discuss how God could use us to meet unmet mental health needs in our community. Our meeting was ending with assignments delegated to various folks when Dr. Hubbard gave a crucially important witness. Prayer *had* to be at the heart of this project. Pray for needed helpers; God will answer that prayer. Abraham's unnamed servant and Christ's servant Tom Hubbard witness to the reality – those with open willing hands who prayerfully ask God's guidance bring blessing. Ordinary bread and wine becoming in Christ's hands the bread of life and cup of salvation. Nothing extraordinary

about us but an extraordinary God at work in us, thanks be to God! What adventures shall we have this year? I know that as we pray for God to guide and lead us, God will take us on incredible journeys. Remember, the second ingredient to a healthy church is prayer. So in the coming year, let's get cooking and praying seriously to see what good things God brings forth. I can hardly wait!