

Genesis 24:23b-32  
Matthew 16:25-30  
July 3, 2011

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### A Sneak or a Manipulator?

I like mysteries and puzzles. There is something compelling in the challenge of relying solely on my wits to unravel what appears impossible. It's why I do the New York Times Sunday puzzle and sometimes the Boston Globe crossword. Often times I consciously have no clue what the answers are but my brain spits something out. 9 times out of 10 it's correct. Somehow those little grey cells (as Hercule Poirot calls them) have absorbed information I had no idea I was taking in.

I guess it benefits us in the long run to read a variety of things, see movies, and watch educational programs...and sometimes it is even fun!

I have said before that the gospel of John is my favorite book of the Bible. It is a mysterious text in some ways. The descriptions twist and ramble on..."in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God..." You can tell what I mean. Normally, I relish sitting with the mystery and mystical. But Jesus' words in Matthew's gospel just frustrated me.

"I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants;"

Even though Jesus goes on to welcome all of us who are heavy burdened, I get the sense that the "rest" he offers isn't a chance to sit by the pool and work on our tans! No, there is a deeper meaning here. Since he just told us that things have been hidden from the wise...and I hope we can be considered wise in most things...it sounds an awful lot like a divine joke being played on us. Is God sneaking around trying to trick us?

The story of Abraham's servant meeting Rebekah at the well has a bit of mystery to it as well. Bob read the heart of the lectionary reading this morning. You may, at some point, want to take out the Bible and read the whole of chapter 24 in Genesis. But here's the gist: Abraham feels compelled to find a wife for Isaac. Why Isaac isn't doing much about it, we don't know. So Abraham sends his servant back to the land from which Abraham left so long ago.

Throughout the journey, the servant – though he's not named, some scholars believe it is Eliezer – is faithful to Abraham and to God. He prays for success in meeting the right woman to be the wife for Isaac. He prays that whoever it is will offer him water when he asks and even go as far as giving water to all the camels with him.

He sees Rebekah come to the well. He asks for a drink. She lowers her jar and then even offers to water his camels. While she does this, Eliezer watches and prays. When she returns, He even goes so far to tell Rebekah all about his charge and his journey and God's faithfulness. He sees her actions as a sign from God and gives her the jewelry as if as a dowry gift.

We know Rebekah returns to her family. Her brother invites the servant in and as they say, the rest is history.

We might look at this story from a matchmaker's angle. It's a "How to find the right woman for the right man" and vice versa kind of tale. We could also interpret it as Abraham trying to force God's hand again. After all, God did promise that Abraham would be a father of nations. Here is his son, Isaac, content to do his day's work and shoot the breeze with his buddies. When's he going to wake up? Old Abe's gotta take some action! Or maybe Abraham's just an interfering old man.

Another take might be to look at the scenario with the servant. Eliezer is saying – "okay, if she does X, I'll talk to her. If she says Y, then she's the one." It's all just superstition or is it? Is God manipulating the scene here, like some video-gamer in the sky, moving the joystick and pushing buttons?

All these angles have been explored. Yes, this story is about finding the right person to share your life. The whole saga of Rebekah and Isaac (more of which we'll talk about next week) involves true love and true challenges. Yes, this is about Abraham trying to kick-start his son's matrimonial status. And yes, we can focus on the servant's actions...but they are not superstitions or about getting God to do what he wanted. It is much more than that. And much more subtle.

Is God sneaky? Is God a manipulator? Neither of these attributes have a positive connotation. God may be tricky, but not sneaky. I remember bargaining with God once I finally said yes to going into the ministry. "Okay God," I said, "I'll do it as long as I don't have to preach!" Getting up in front of people was the scariest thing for me. Obviously, I was given some tools to get over that!!

God is a creator God, who set things in motion. Everything under the sun has its purpose. For us human creatures, we do not always know right away what purpose or potential we have. It has to be discovered. So God may have a purpose for us, but God doesn't manipulate us like a puppeteer pulling strings. Some people feel better envisioning God that way, but it certainly makes for a lot of even tougher questions. Others believe God is absent. Even the most devout religious have months, even years, when their prayers are drought-stricken. Theologians call this the "Silence of God."

The key to understanding all this is that the whole drama of the Bible indicates that "life and history are shaped as they happen,"<sup>i</sup> by God and by us humans. Our relationships with one another, our world and with our God, all unfold in various ways. Every choice we make sets us on a path, for good or for ill, or for a simple walk through the woods. We have the freedom to make decisions, decisions that shape our lives and also affect the world around us. How do we know when we are making the right ones?

We have to get to know God and we do this by immersing ourselves in the Bible, praying and sharing in the community of faith. We do this! How many of us have heard stories of blessings even in the midst of tragedy from our friends and fellow church members? Even when tough

things happen, if we have a healthy prayer life and the support of fellow believers, we can find our way through. This is the “rest” that Jesus promises.

And that prayer life? Well, Abraham’s servant gives a pretty good example. He talks everything out with God. We have to be aware of what we ask for and realize that sometimes silence is an answer. As James Killen says, “God does know and care what is going on in our world and in our lives. God is at work in our lives for our good. If we learn to live in responsiveness to what God is doing in our lives, we will reap the benefits of blessedness. We may need a bigger definition of a happy ending than we have usually worked with in the past. But if we can come up with that bigger definition, God can lead us to more happy endings than we can imagine.”<sup>ii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> James L. Killen **The Way To Happy Endings**, from the book *Sermons On The First Readings Series I, Cycle A*

<sup>ii</sup> *ibid*