

Into the Unknown
Genesis 24:34-49, 58-67

Have you ever traveled to a foreign country and after a first night's sleep awoken to find yourself feeling totally disoriented? After college, I taught English as a Second Language at a junior college in Nagasaki, Japan. It's one thing not to know the language but a whole other thing not to be able to read the thousands of characters that make up the language. Try reading the directions on how to make instant curry when everything is written in Kanji or Chinese characters. In a train station, one must be careful that one does not end up on the wrong train heading towards the wrong island. Being the one blonde looking down upon a sea of dark heads, I definitely felt I was in the minority. When teenagers saw me, they would yell out, "Gaijin" or "Foreigner" pointing and laughing. On a good day, it was funny. On other days, it makes me want to cry. And speaking of crying, more than once when I smiled at a baby or toddler while riding the street car, they burst into tears as if I was some kind of monster.

Being a "stranger in a strange land" is not an easy thing to do but this was the invitation God presented to Rebekah. Perhaps, Rebekah was naïve about all that lay ahead of her if she indeed gave her consent to going with the servant of Abraham to a new land to marry a man she had never met. Yes, it was the men- her brother, Laban and father, Bethuel brokered this marriage. But perhaps because the circumstances of this marriage arrangement were so extreme, Rebekah in fact was given an out. In the end, it was she who would choose whether or not to go with the servant of Abraham to begin a new life with a new husband in a foreign land. Yet, she couldn't help but feel that she was being asked to participate in something much bigger than herself. In fact, her decision wasn't just about her but she would help decide the future of God's chosen people. Was she willing to trust God's leading to a future she could neither glimpse nor imagine?

God had led the servant of Abraham to the city of Nahor to the very well where Rebekah daily came to fill her water jar. It seemed only natural to share her water with the stranger at the well and to water his camels as well. But the response she received was surprising. The man put a giant gold ring in her nose and two huge gold bracelets on her arm while asking for

shelter for the night. When she responded that he was welcome to stay with them, the man bowed his head and worshipped God saying, "Blessed be the Lord God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master. The Lord has led me on the way to the house of my master's kin." Rebekah ran to tell her mother of the stranger's request and Rebekah's brother, Laban went out to take stock of the situation. After the servant shared his mission explaining that he had been sent to find a wife for Isaac, Abraham's son, Laban and Bethuel agreed to the plan to give Rebekah to be Isaac's wife. But ultimately Rebekah was left to choose her destiny. If she refused to go with the servant to return to Canaan, he would be released from the oath he swore to Abraham to go to Mesopotamia and find a wife for Isaac. The future of Abraham's descendants hinges upon Rebekah's cooperation with the servant's request that she leave her kinsfolk and travel to an unknown land to be married to someone she has never met. Not only is Rebekah asked to leave all she has known and loved, but she is not even given the customary 10 day period in which to say good-bye. Will she go immediately with the servant to the land of Canaan to meet her future husband, Isaac? "I will," said Rebekah. With these words, Rebekah courageously decided her fate and went on to become the shrewdest and most powerful of matriarchs.

Now, we in our culture are not very sympathetic to arranged marriages. We believe in romance and the power of love to bring people together. But ultimately, it is through God's grace that two persons come together and through the covenant of marriage make a covenant before God and the community to love and cherish one another. The notion that it is the duty of the wife to be obedient to her husband has long been struck from our marriage vows. People in partnership realize there must be a give and take if a real union is to be realized.

Forgive me for stretching the analogy but let's play with this idea for a minute. You the congregation at College Avenue Presbyterian have concluded a 31 year covenant with your former pastor, George Humbert. In this covenant, you promised to honor and support George and to follow his leadership. You celebrated his ministry with you and now comes the grief of realizing he can no longer be your pastor in the way he once was. No matter how

much you may wish to deny his absence pretending that he is on sabbatical or something, the truth is- George has retired. It may seem strange to run into him at a board meeting of Oasis or in the grocery store and realizing that things have changed. And now there is someone new here. You may feel a little like someone caught in an arranged marriage. With an installed pastor, the congregation is able to vote after hearing the pastor preach. But you're stuck. Your representatives on the interim pastor search committee were commissioned with the task and session has approved their choice.

Every denomination has its polity or way of governing. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) believes in the value of taking time between calling pastors in order to reflect on the past and to vision for a new future. Let's just call this an engagement period in which you are allowing God to speak to you about the qualities, gifts and skills you desire in the future pastor for this church. Now, we know that I'm not the person you will be making this commitment with but I am here to accompany you on this process of discernment. During this time in the life of this church, God has called me to be your pastor. This interim period is very sacred time when till the soil for future growth and watch expectantly for signs of God's leading. Sometimes amazing things can happen within a short amount of time. Some persons we know only briefly can be some of the most significant people in our lives.

We're a little like Rebekah who's been invited to travel into the unknown trusting that in so doing; God will reveal the road to us. Our cooperation with God means letting go of our own agenda and time line and placing our trust in the Holy Spirit's leading. This process requires listening at a deeper level to the stirrings of God's guidance.

Now, let's admit it, none of us likes change. We long to retain the familiar rituals and habits which help give us our identity. But life has a way of shaking things up from time to time in order to shift our reliance back to God and not on ourselves.

Each person in this story from Genesis- Rebekah, the servant of Abraham, Laban and Bethuel was called to discern the will of God while making difficult decisions. God was summoning them to a time of new beginnings but they had to be willing to intuit the benevolent hand of God in the circumstances of their lives. Taking everything to God in prayer and supplication we too will be able to wade through the chaos and confusion of our

lives and discover holy answers to prayer. With the assurance that God can use even people like us, we become willing to play our part in the larger drama of carrying out God's plan. In the midst of the myriads of demands placed upon us, let us recognize God's call in our lives and surrender ourselves to the leading of the Holy Spirit.