

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 9A)

July 6, 2008

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45:11-18; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

This week end we've been celebrating the founding fathers. (And mothers, I hope: women like Abigail Adams, whose wisdom and counsel were valued widely, not only by her husband John.) We have marked the 232nd anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the founding principles of a new nation.

That document sets forth not only the justification for the colonies' separating themselves from the British king, but also the ideals by which we still seek to live together. It is a covenant for a new nation, as well as a declaration of independence from the old. The principles of equality, and "unalienable rights to Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" have drawn millions to this land to become part of a people who do try to live by those ideals. At its best, the July 4th celebration is a ritual of covenant renewal, remembering and reaffirming first principles, about which we need always to be vigilant and to hold ourselves and our leaders accountable.

As we come to the end of the holiday week end, we hear another piece of the story of our ancestors in the *faith*, one that offers a peaceful interlude in the sometimes rocky history of the patriarchs and matriarchs, Abraham and Sarah, and their descendants. If the behavior of the human players in that larger story sometimes makes it seem like a soap opera (David, re Abraham's casting out Hagar and Ishmael, at Sarah's insistence) . . . or if we sometimes feel as if we've walked in on a horror movie (as when God commanded Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering, and intervened only at the last minute when Abraham was about to do just that)—today we have a respite from all that sort of drama.

Today we have ROMANCE, a story beautifully told and much loved. In verses omitted by the lectionary, the narrator begins by recounting the action. Then the narrator has the servant repeat the whole story to Rebekah's family. A love story this good is good enough to tell twice in one sitting!

Romance it is, and, yet, more than romance—except insofar as it is part of God's romance with human beings. Something very big is happening here. God's promise to Abraham, of descendants as many as the stars (15:5) is assured. The God who had provided—fulfilling the promise of new life even when Abraham was old, "as good as dead," and Sarah, no youngster herself, was barren; God who intervened to save the life of Isaac, who lay helpless, by providing a ram for the sacrifice—God would again provide new life. Indeed, it was God who answered the prayer of Abraham's servant at the well in Haran. This was a match made in heaven!

The story is huge for other reasons, also. In the person of Rebekah, the new generation, steps into the covenant in complete trust, much as Abraham himself had done when God called *him* to set out from Haran to a land he had never seen. Now Rebekah is called to leave her home and family in Haran to go to that same land, that *she's* never

seen, to marry a distant cousin she's never laid eyes on. (Though she does seem to find him attractive when she does see him: "Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us?" Ah, love, maybe love at first sight.)

Like Abraham, Rebekah does not hesitate. "Will you go with this man?" She said, "I will." She sets out in the same trust as did Abraham. As she leaves, her family blesses her, "May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads," a blessing in the spirit of God's promise to Abraham that his descendants would be as many as the stars (15:5). And *she* was a woman, who actually *speaks* in the story, while Abraham often remains strangely silent. Rebekah is shown great respect by the narrator, and it is notable in the context of the patriarchal culture of ancient Israel.

She took a risk in leaving her old life for new and unknown relationships, with Isaac and his God, as there is so often, perhaps always, risk in answering God's call. Abraham also risked when he sent back to Haran for a wife for Isaac to secure the future. For that matter, God also continued to risk, simply by being in relationship with human beings, risking always that his own faithfulness will move us to respond with faithfulness ourselves.

In other verses omitted by the lectionary, before leaving on the search for a wife for Isaac, Abraham's servant asked him, "Perhaps the woman may not be willing to follow me to this land; must I then take your son back to the land from which you came?" (24:5) *Nothing doing!*, Abraham had replied. God promised to give *this* land to Abraham's offspring. God "will send his angel before you" and you will find a wife for Isaac there, Abraham told his servant. (24:7) But if the woman won't follow you, all bets are off in that direction. There is no going back to Haran to stay. The way of the covenant is forward, in the new land and new life God provides. Well did Abraham know, from experience, that even the most impossible dead-end will not stop God. And, indeed, while the risk of failure was acknowledged, everything worked out according to God's plan.

Today's Gospel reading also offers some respite, especially following the reading two weeks ago that raised the specter of family division and even betrayal. (Mt. 10:24-39) Jesus's final words today are comforting (they are among the "comfortable words" in Rite I), an invitation to the weary and heavy laden to come and find rest in him. But, still, the passage is set in a context of conflict that, as we know, will only continue to intensify.

At the beginning of today's chapter, even John the Baptist—who had recognized Jesus at his baptism as the one more powerful than he, the one who was coming after him—even John now had his doubts, disappointed as he was that Jesus has not come with fire to set the world straight. From prison, John sent his disciples to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (11:3) "Go and tell John what you hear and see," Jesus replied, "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to

them.” (11:4-5) All these are promises in scripture of the messianic age, signs of God’s steadfast compassion and healing.

“And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me,” Jesus had said. (11:6) The trouble was that so many did take offense at him, as they also took offense at John. Neither Jesus nor John could win for losing. If one—John—was severe, and wailed, well, he should have danced instead. If the other—Jesus—was joyful and led the dance, well, he should have wailed and mourned. What was going on?

“This generation,” like all generations, wanted a savior who would come to them on their own terms, respond to their wishes. And, so, they did not respond themselves, with trust and faith, to Jesus. They could not see, or hear, or really know him. They were confused about who it is who calls the tune—not we, but God. “Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds,” the proverb says. Look at the evidence; see what God was and is doing in Jesus, and dance with him, to his tune; and then mourn with him for a world still blind and deaf to God’s way of mercy and justice.

But there were, and are, those who did respond, who did come to him. These tend not to be the powerful and self sufficient (though nothing is impossible with God). These are the little ones, infants (babies in faith). The weak, the helpless, the poor, the ones willing to become vulnerable, willing to “change and become like children” (18:3). The ones who came to him to be healed; his disciples, who followed him even when they did not fully understand who he was or what he was doing. For these, Jesus uttered a prayer of thanksgiving. To these he makes the invitation to come to him, “and you will find rest for your souls.”

Also, he said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” In Judaism, the yoke is a symbol of obedience to the law of God; one is yoked to God under the law. So we end where we began, with covenant; in this case, God’s new covenant in Jesus, with a people who have seen in him the incarnation of God’s purpose to heal and to overcome the power of Sin and Death.

His yoke is easy, he says, and his burden light. But we know about the cross, and we may know something of being rejected or suspect because we follow him. How is this easy?

A yoke is for two. If we take Jesus’ yoke, we walk in relationship with him and, in him, with the Father. There could be no better yoke than his because it liberates, sets free from Sin and Death. We are yoked with him in love of God and neighbor, humankind, world.

What an amazing gift and opportunity, because the desire for this is in our deepest and best selves: the desire to serve, to know, and to love God and one another. To walk in his way, continuing the journey with God begun with Abraham and Sarah, picked up by Rebekah and Isaac, and through all the generations since and still to come. To walk in his way is, indeed, the truest pursuit of Happiness.