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Genesis 24: selected verses

Love at First Sight - and After?

“The only true love is love at first sight. Second sight dispels it.”

Is there such a thing as love at first sight? Can it be true? I have my doubts—as my husband can affirm, my sentimental side is underdeveloped. To me, love at first sight sounds like the stuff of implausible romantic comedies. And yet here it is, in—of all places—the Bible, in the Book of Genesis, today’s Old Testament reading. And what a welcome reading it is, what a welcome turn of events in the Abrahamic family saga. Cynical though I can be, I’m happy to have this long first reading after the last couple Sundays, after the near deaths of Ishmael and Isaac. I appreciate today not having to preach on infanticide and the problem of evil.

Instead: a love story, probably the closest the Bible comes to romance except for parts of Song of Solomon, which are steamy, but a little weird, which include such sexy verses as: “Your belly is a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies...” and “Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon.” I don’t know if it’s time or translation, but those metaphors sound strange to me...

The story of Isaac and Rebekah, on the other hand, includes familiar tropes, follows timeless romantic trajectories, some of which we may have missed. You probably noticed that, in addition to being long, today’s first reading was also heavily excerpted—that wasn’t even the half of it. The love story of Isaac and Rebekah makes up the longest chapter in Genesis. Like every good love story, there’s dramatic tension, a long build up to the couple coming together. What we heard today cuts out a lot of it, including lots of dialogue from the witty and helpful associate. We also heard an abbreviated entrance of the female lead, but we do hear how she passes the test: she shows she’s nice, not just to humans, but to animals as well. Rebekah’s offer to water the camels is even more impressive when you do the math, because she’s watering a caravan, and one camel can drink 30 gallons of water. (I envy this woman’s biceps.) Perhaps even more impressively, it appears that she has her nose pierced on the spot. (Ouch.) Our bachelorette passes the test with flying colors, but then her family, including a difficult brother, must be appeased. But Rebekah continues to show pluck, readily agrees to leave her homeland and set off to marry a man she’s never laid eyes on.

Finally, we’re getting to the “love at first sight” part. Rebekah nears the place where Isaac is, he’s out wandering in the fields, a tortured soul? He sees her approach; she sees her intended, and, the text says, “She fell off her camel.” That’s what it says, though that’s not what we just heard read. The translation we heard renders it, “She slipped quickly from the camel,” which makes it sound elegant, demure, but the original Hebrew says quite plainly that she fell off, Rebekah, capable, confident, caught in a face plant. She gets up and asks, “Is that him?”

It is. And they are married, and she is a comfort to him, for he has been mourning. Isaac’s been out wandering, wrapped in grief, mourning the death of his mother. It’s a love story, but it’s more than a romantic comedy. Or rather, like the best of comedies, the truest of them, it includes the brush with, the awareness of, the existence of sorrow, grief, tragedy. Isaac wasn’t sacrificed, but he almost was. He came that close to dying, and then his mother did. Isaac’s beloved mother died—as will all we love, one day. Isaac was left bereft. And then Rebekah appeared, falling off her camel. They saw one another—she on her tush, maybe in a

camel turd, he lost in grief. They saw one another, and they became husband and wife, and there was comfort.

There is such a thing as love at first sight, the Bible says. Not just here in Genesis chapter twenty-four, much earlier in Genesis as well, in the very first chapter of Genesis, which also talks about love at first sight. In Genesis chapter one God saw what God had made, and saw that it was good. God saw the culmination of creation—human beings, male and female—God saw all God had made, and God said it was very good. God loves us, at first sight.

But even more than that, God also loves us, after heartbreak, after sadness and grief, after tragedy. Maybe even more than a testament to love at first sight, we cynics need to hear the love story of Isaac and Rebekah to be reminded of this: to hear testament of something that is hard to believe but incontrovertibly true: after heartbreak, there can still be love, still be comfort. It may seem impossible, it may seem unbelievable, but it happens, it is true. After heartbreak, there can still be love. You may have your own story of this, or know someone else's. It is all our story with God. After we left Eden, after we wandered so far from God, after we made a mess of life, while were in that very mess, God saw us, and loved us. The Bible says that God shows his great love for us in this, that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. That's the passion of God's love for us. It's so hard to fathom we can only get at it with metaphors: it's as a bridegroom to a bride, it's as a marriage banquet for a king to which beggars are invited, it's a heavenly wedding feast that has no end.

I was at wedding banquet recently, my husband and I sat across from a couple we didn't know, they might have been in their sixties. We exchanged pleasantries, "Where are you from?" The conversation took interesting turns, they were from very different places, "Well how did you meet?" They didn't say, "love at first sight," but they certainly took note when they first laid eyes on each other on opposite sides of a courtroom. One was a probation officer, one a social worker; they were in a juvenile court, advocating on different sides on behalf of a troubled youth. After the trial, the woman called her courtroom opponent and asked him out. They've been together now for several decades. Recently, they got a message on Facebook from that former juvenile, also now much older himself. They got the sense that his troubles continued; he'd lived a hard life. But he was happy to find them; he said, because he could look at them and think, at least one good thing came out of his life—and he was still trying to turn things around. That story moved me, in different ways, it made me wish I could tell that man what the Bible tells us all, that every one of us is one good thing—and more. God says so, in the Bible, and in Christ.

A couple weeks ago my siblings and I got together for our parents' 50th wedding anniversary. It was a joyous celebration. The other word to describe it is implausible: implausible that we managed to get it, to get all six of us, all together; that with the outdoor party the 90% chance of rain held off; that my taciturn, sardonic oldest brother shared a tribute while continuously choking up; but perhaps most implausible of all is my parents' marriage, which my parents would affirm. Maybe all marriage is in some ways, implausible. Maybe that's why marriage is such a strong metaphor in the Bible: not just because of its familiarity and joy, but because of its implausibility and truth, and because of the comfort it can convey, to a weary and burdened and cynical world, because earthly love gives us, not full sight, but a glimpse, a glimpse into the love of God, everlasting and eternal God, who loved us from the first, and came into time, to love us even more.