

An Arranged Covenant

Sermon delivered by Rev. Susan Morrison on July 3, 2005
Holy Trinity UMC, Danvers

Scripture lesson from Genesis 24 (see attached)

I remember this spring “peeking ahead” in the lectionary to see what scripture lessons were referenced for my first Sunday at Holy Trinity on July 3rd. And when I read the 24th chapter of Genesis, I felt like the angel that accompanied Abraham’s servant to Nahor was sitting right on my shoulder.

Why this is a story about Holy Trinity, I thought. It is about the bishop and the cabinets concern for the new pastor who would follow Richard Higgins and the wooing of that woman to Danvers!

Why this is a story about God’s promise of faithfulness to Holy Trinity and God’s desire for its prosperity.

Why this is a story about prayer and the importance of prayer in seeking divine guidance, especially when decisions are being made.

Why this is a story about love, and how love will comfort and sustain us all and give us a reason to find new life together.

So, for a few minutes, let’s reflect on this ancient biblical narrative and see how it speaks to us today. I like to think of it as a three act play (and I know that you understand theater and drama and acts of plays!).

ACT 1

Act 1 is about Abraham’s concern for the future of his beloved son, Isaac. In the contemporary context, you are the Isaac of the story. With the announcement of Richard Higgin’s retirement, Holy Trinity found itself without a partner, without a spiritual leader, without a spouse. And the bishop and cabinet were more than happy to arrange a marriage!

Notice, though, how they were aware of God’s intentions for this body of Christ. They knew that God had made a covenant at the founding of this congregation in 1871, when Methodists located themselves in Tapleyville. It was a mutual covenant. Jesus’ disciples at Holy Trinity agreed to be faithful to Jesus’ teachings and God agreed to be faithful and encouraging and supportive of this congregation. You and the Holy Trinity – God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, have been in this covenant now for a long time. So, the bishop and cabinet, realizing God’s love for you, wanted to do the best they could to find you the right new pastor.

Prayer was a major part of the discernment process and through prayer it was decided to send their servant, Paul Chang, District Superintendent of your district, to woo one of your very own back to Holy Trinity. It appeared that it was God’s intentions not to marry you off to a stranger, an alien, someone from “another place” bur rather to bring one of your own home for this arranged marriage, just as Abraham instructed his servant to bring home “one of their own” for the marriage to Isaac.

For you see, the Morrison family has deep roots in Danvers. Jay Morrison, my life's partner, remembers visiting his grandparents on Burley Ave. from a very early age. Joshua and Ethel Merrill lived in that house on hospital hill all of their married life and their only daughter, Betty, was in the first class to graduate from Holton High School. She later married Chester Morrison at Maple Street Congregational Church in 1941.

Years later, Jay and I chose to live in Danvers, partly because of the family history. When we arrived in 1977, we brought our three children with us, and each of them was enrolled one by one at the Smith School. We quickly found Holy Trinity UMC and made it our church home.

It was during the eleven years that we lived in Danvers that I went to seminary, graduated from Andover Newton Theological School, was ordained in the United Methodist tradition and served this church as a student pastor and then assistant pastor with Bob Hannum before taking a full time appointment in Andover in 1988.

It was indeed significant and a real exception in the appointment process that the bishop and cabinet would decide to bring a pastor home.

ACT 2

In Act 2 Abraham's faithful servant prepares for the journey to woo a wife for Isaac. Thank goodness Paul Chang didn't bring me ten camels, but he did bring a "Letterman list" of the ten top reasons of why I should take the appointment.

- Reason #10 The mortgage is almost paid off on the addition.*
- Reason #9 There is a wonderful congregation and very active lay leadership*
- Reason #8 There are lots of children in the Sunday School and a wonderful Vacation Bible School every summer that serves the community*
- Reason #7 There is a youth group – and a great group of youth*
- Reason #6 There is a dynamic Christian Education director whom everyone loves*
- Reason #5 There is a fabulous music program with five choirs, including children, youth adult and bell choirs*
- Reason #4 There is an extraordinarily gifted Music Director who brings vitality to worship and to the life of the congregation and even produces Broadway bound musicals*
- Reason #3 Ruthann Pierce is still the secretary*
- Reason #2 The trustees will rehab the toilet in the Pastor's Office so that it flushes*
- Reason #1 You can reclaim the Susan Morrison memorial desk in the library and make it your own in the Pastor's Office*

It was an awesome list of reasons to return!

Prayer was at the heart of my meeting with Paul Chang.

We both asked for God's will to be done. We looked at Holy Trinity's profile and talked about what gifts I could bring to the appointment.

There was no gold ring or gold bracelets, instead there was a salary package which included a housing allowance, which meant that Jay and I could continue to live in Marblehead in the house that his Grandfather Morrison built for his parents as a wedding gift.

I went home filled with hope and possibility. I was not sure that I could leave Lexington UMC. They were in the midst of an important process to discern their own future. Like Rebecca's mother and brother, they would want me to stay for a while longer.

But, like Rebecca in our morning lesson, I was the one who had to answer and I had to believe that my response would further God's purposes. After a positive meeting with Staff Parish Relations Committee, I concluded: "Yes, I am ready to take the appointment."

ACT 3

Today is Act 3 of the story. I have journeyed from Lexington to Danvers and unpacked my belongings and am beginning to feel settled. And today we celebrate the arranged covenant, a marriage between us that will continue to pass on the rich Christian heritage to the next generation.

But in the midst of celebrating the new covenant, let us not miss the concluding verse of this narrative. Isaac and Rebecca were married and it was the marriage that comforted Isaac after the death of his mother, Sarah.

We both arrive at today's arranged covenant acknowledging the grief that we have only too recently experienced. I have left a ten year appointment that was a gift to me and to Lexington UMC and you have just said good-bye to Richard Higgins who was your pastor for 12 years. It is good that we can begin our ministry together acknowledging our losses and feeling our grief, remembering that God intends for us to love each other, and that eventually the love that we share in our covenant will sustain us and encourage us and inspire us to be the disciples that Jesus intends for us to be.

How blessed and excited I am to be back among. How thankful I am for the "arranged covenant." May our love grow for each other as we enter into mutual ministry together.

And now, let's begin our covenant life together by praying together.