

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

Our first scripture lesson this morning is the story of Abraham's search for a wife for his son Isaac. Remember that Sarah and Abraham gave birth to a son even though they were elderly and had given up hope that they be ever be so blest. Yet God had made a promise to Abraham that his descendants, beloved by God, would be a numerous as the grains of sand on the beach and the stars in the sky. Isaac was the potential answer to that pledge, but he, too, would need to have children of his own. So, Abraham sends his servant out to find a wife for Isaac. Remember, too, that Abraham has demonstrated that he and God share this vision of the future. He has obediently offered his son as his response to God's pledge of property, progeny, provision, and protection. He and God are now on the same page. They both want the same thing. Isaac has become Abraham's living sacrifice, a sacrament, to show that his intentions are aligned with God's blessing.

So, the servant, following Abe's instructions, goes in search for this potential daughter-in-law. He heads eastward, back along the route Abraham traveled when leaving Herra for Palestine, hoping to find a true kins-person, a cousin, to be Isaac's bride. He takes with him several camels as well as gifts for the woman and her family. He also takes with him, he hopes, God's blessing, since this expedition is really a faithful step toward the shared vision of the Abrahamic covenant. And he prays. The servant prays that God will help him know that he is on the right path. He asks for God's guidance and reassurance. He asks that God will endorse and fulfill his work. He asks that God might please provide. And specifically, he asks for a sign. He prays that when he arrives at a certain well, he will meet a young woman who has come there to draw water, and that the two will have a conversation which will result in him and his camels being watered. That will be the sign that he is in the right place at the right time with the right person, in agreement with God's will.

Now in truth, that doesn't seem like a very specific or eye-opening sign. In fact, it's kind of a cliché. In that arid region east of Palestine, a well would be a common landmark, and finding women there drawing water wouldn't be that surprising in that ancient culture. And the culture was known for its hospitality to strangers, which would certainly have included offering water to both man and beast. Yet when it happens as the servant has hoped and prayed, he takes it as a remarkable and encouraging sign. Could be as much a coincidence as a sign from Almighty God, don't you think?

But, here's the thing: Everyone in this story agrees about the efficacy of this sign from God. Everyone in this little community of characters agrees that this is a sign of God's will. The servant certainly believes it. Abraham and Isaac, even though they weren't there, become convinced by the servant's testimony. Rebekah believes it, and is willing to go with the stranger to become the wife of someone she hasn't even met. And her father and her brother, Laban, when asked that she leave them for good, seem to just shrug their shoulders and say, "Hey, this thing comes from God" Now, mind you, Rebekah is a bit incentivized by the gifts of golden bracelets, and her family, too, by the gifts the servant has brought for them, but everyone in this story is willing to accept this gift and blessing of God, convinced that God has graciously shown them sign, that they are all on the same page with God, that they share with God the same optimistic vision of destiny. It binds them sacramentally. It yokes them together in common purpose. And maybe that is the true wisdom here, maybe that is the true sign from Almighty God, that they want to receive God together.

Do you know what this is? No, it's not a sacred relic or a religious artifact. It's a yoke from some random farm which Mark Zebrowski found and gave to me. A yoke which some farm animal would have worn in service to its master. You know, the kind we think of that oxen might wear, sometimes doubled up and yoked together. This one looks a little too small for an ox, or even for a mule. In fact, it's so small that when I tried to put it on myself, I broke it. (Don't tell Mark...he and Leslie are at camp for the holiday weekend and probably aren't participating in this service with us this morning) I've tried to fix it with duct tape...But, no it's not a religious symbol. It's a prop...or maybe a prompt, as Jesus used the idea of a yoke in the teaching we heard in today's

Gospel from Matthew. He says that *his* yoke is easy and his burden is light. Matthew, BTW, is often called the 'teaching gospel'. It regularly casts Jesus as a teacher, teaching difficult and provocative lessons to his disciples and followers. The famous teachings of his 'Sermon on the Mount', for example, are in Matthew's narrative. And the last verses of Matthew's Gospel, in fact, are an imperative, a commandment for the apostles to go forth into the world to baptize and *teach*. Well, in today's teaching, Jesus famously teaches about his yoke and burden, his vision of faithfulness, the one he hopes we will share.

In his open letter to the Romans, that is, the new Christians under domination by Rome, the Apostle Paul speaks of a different kind of yoke, that of enslavement. The yoke might well be a symbol of common vision and purpose, but it can also be a symbol of cruel enslavement. Enslavement to sin, to those things which are antithetical to God's dream, to those awful things which separate us from God's presence and God's care. Enslavement to addiction, to abuse, to generations of poverty, to alienation, and to vicious hatred of self and others. St. Paul, in these chapters of Romans, expresses his frustration with sinfulness, his passionate hatred of what it does to him. Revealingly, he writes, "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me." He says he is yoked to sin, enslaved by it, and yet is devoted to removing that yoke, no matter what. He wants his independence from it, as don't we all.

Removing that yoke of sinfulness, breaking free of it perhaps, requires determination, and God's help. And often, it requires community. The community of characters in our own stories need to be on the same page to recognize the signs of Almighty God. What a blessing it is when we can somehow share a common vision with God, and use our unique individual talents and skills and passions and callings to respond together in the cause of defeating the sin among us. It is possible, isn't it? It is the faithful thing to do, right? To offer our individual liberty to a shared vision, as Abraham did with his son Isaac, to sacrifice and contribute in response to God's promises of creation and posterity. To assist one another in removing those yokes of enslavement. And to achieve independence together.

Our lessons today teach that there are two different yokes, one of enslavement and the other of faithfulness. To receive God's promises, to participate in God's dream, we are called to trade one for the other, and to trade up! You may not know this, but the clerical collar and the clerical stole, are meant to represent a yoke. When one takes the vows of a clergyperson, one become yoked to God and to the people. I am yoked to God and to you, the ones to whom I preach and for whom I am called to care. That is to say, I am bound to God and to you, as we pursue a common vision, a vision of a world healed by love. I wear the collar and the stole to remind myself, and you, too, that there is a need for us to be bound together, despite disagreements, particularities, difference of opinions, backgrounds, ethnicities, whatever. The yoke we are called to trade up to, the yoke we are called to share, the yoke which is wise and faithful, is the one which binds us to Christ's love.

Those of you who are regulars at our parish Bible study will know that it is one of my little tricks to look for the imperatives, that is, the commands, which God uses in any given passage of scripture. In today's gospel, Jesus says "Come"; that's the imperative. Come to me. Come to me those who are struggling. Trade that yoke for mine. For, he says, you will find rest for your souls, for that yoke is so easy when we bear it together, you and I and Christ. And when we accept Christ's invitation, and share his vision together, the burdens become surprisingly lighter. Amen

Jesus Imperative