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“A Series of Fortunate Events”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
Psalm 145: 8-14, Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30, Genesis 24

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At the conclusion to the Abraham saga

comes this wonderful epilogue, this finding of a wife for Isaac.

But it comes directly on the heels of two traumatic episodes:

the near death of Isaac, at the hand of his own father;

and the death of Abraham's wife, Sarah, at 127 years of age.

And it comes in sharp contrast to the two previous cataclysmic family upheavals.

And now, in their ensuing days of father/son grieving,

as Abraham nears the point of death himself,

God's promise to Abraham remains intact, yet fraught with threat.

“Because you have not withheld your son, your only son,” Yahweh says,

“I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous

as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore...

...and through your offspring all nations on earth

will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.” (Gen. 22:16-18)

However, as we mortals know so well, even the best of promises

is but one mere generation shy of extinction.

Abraham knows this as well.

If he is to become the “father of a multitude”,
and if he is to become the progenitor of a sojourning people who are willing
risk all comfort and control on God’s promises,
then he must find a suitable wife for his son, Isaac.
Things will not work well if the son of the promise remains a bachelor.

And so Abraham commissions his chief servant,
to continue his journey motif, this stepping out, in his stead,
and to return to his homeland, Haran, and find a wife for his son,
another “stepper-outer”, a suitable matriarch of the promise.
He makes the servant place his hand under his thigh
and swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and earth,
that he won’t cheat on the charge
and short-change him with a local girl instead.

Is God initiating this endeavor? We don’t know from the text.

God is not one of the characters who speaks or acts directly.

The intervention of God here is hardly perceptible.

But we do know that this is the *only* place in Abraham’s saga

where Abraham repeats the divine charge issued to him at his outset:

“Yahweh, the God of heaven, who took me from my father’s house
and the house of my birth, and who spoke to me and swore to me,
‘to your descendants I will give this land,’ he will
send an angel before you, and you shall take a wife for
my son from there” (24:7).

Which suggests that Abraham now understands that the core of his identity
is as a trustee of the divine promise, and that all of his
subsequent actions arise as an expression of that identity and call.

And so the story unfolds rather perfectly from that point,
which is what is so astonishing to me.

Have you ever experienced such a series of fortunate events,
where everything falls into place exactly as wished and planned?

The chief servant travels back to Haran,
where Abraham first heard Yahweh's call and responded
settles near a well to water his camels,
and prays that God will show kindness to his master, Abraham,
by revealing the perfect girl to him.

And before he even finishes praying, up walks Rebekah, water jar in hand,
the appointed words on her lips,
the pedigree exactly to Abraham's specifications.

Is it real, or is it Memorex?

Is this God's providence, or is it pure coincidence?

The test is in the request for her to return with the servant to Canaan.

For from the outset, the choice is hers to make.

Will she choose to be a sojourner, like Abraham and Sarah?

Will she also hear and respond to the call to "Go from your land
and from your kinfolk and from your father's household?"

Will she be a stepper-outer, a risk-taker, a God-truster, a positive deviant,
not by coercion, but by freedom of her own choosing?

When Rebekah answers, "I will" in v. 58, the perfect marriage is set:

the marriage of Abraham's initiative,
of God's affirmation of Abraham's actions,
and Rebekah's free will to join, or not join, God's sojourning people.

The reason that this perfect little story, this series of fortunate events
fascinates me so, is because it comes in such sharp contrast
to the previous cataclysmic episode, the binding of Isaac,
where the absolutely unthinkable nearly happens,
and where life and promise nearly die.

And I began to notice similar stories in scripture,

where great tragedy and threat is quickly resolved
with a tale of perfect harmony and restoration.

The story of the flood, for example, that perfectly awful destruction
of all of creation, save for a remnant of couples afloat in a boat,
ends happily somewhere over the rainbow, with an olive branch and a promise.
And the story of Job, of a good man who loses everything except his wife,
resolves rather neatly with God making Job prosperous again,
blessing him more in the latter part of his life
than in the first, with a plethora of sheep,
cattle, camels, oxen, donkeys, sons and daughters.

What are we to make of such neat, tidy endings to experiences of
such heinous tragedy, suffering, and loss of life?

Hellmouth: that's what Norman Rush, in his novel, *Mortals*,
calls these unexplained episodes of unfortunate events.

Hellmouth is his way of talking about the opening of the mouth of hell
right in front of you, without warning, through no fault of your own;
an apt image, I think, for what many experience in life.

Hellmouth is a 500 year flood occurring again, 15 years later,
along the Mississippi.

Hellmouth is a lifeless body found in the street, that is somebody's daughter,
and somebody's student body's president.

It's the realization that your spouse is involved with someone else,
who happens to be a close friend of yours.

It's abuse at the hands of someone you thought you loved and trusted.

It's Guantanamo; it's Darfur; it's another term of Mugabe.

It's the death or disabling of a child;
always with a child, it is worse.

Rush says, "With children you create more thin places in the world
for hellmouth to break through." (Rush, *Mortals*, p. 203)

James Woods in a recent issue of *The New Yorker* says,

“There is reason to hope that life

will be a business of evenly rationed suffering: stern parents perhaps,
a few humiliations at school, then a love affair or two gone wrong,
maybe a marriage broken.

Our parents will die, and farther off, ideally deferred,

will come our own steady demise.

Plenty of suffering for a life, certainly

but most of us subsist on the plausible expectation that fortune
will draw a circle around that personal portion,
and that the truly unbearable – murder, rape, dead children, torture, war
will remain outside the cordon.”

(James Woods. “Holiday In Hellmouth”. *The New Yorker*. 6/9&16, 2008. p.
116)

A close friend of mine is on the brink of hellmouth these days:

she lost her only child in a freak automobile accident;
then her marriage fell apart as a result of that death;
and now she is battling colon cancer.

I keep thinking to myself, can it get any worse?

She tells me that the worst part was losing her child;

that these other incidences pale in comparison to that loss.

I recently received a letter from an elder in New Hope Presbytery

prior to General Assembly that sent a chill of hellmouth down my spine,
a chill for any person or group of people who are targets of hatred.

It read:

Dear Pastors and voting Delegates,

*Your recent decision regarding G-6.0106b, deleting the “fidelity and
chastity” wording, immensely grieved me and other parishioners in our*

congregations as well as the Presbyterian churches at large. Not only do I consider your decision apostate, but those of you who voted for it are on the slippery slope of damning yourselves. As leaders and teachers you will be held accountable by God for your decisions, which attempts to debase God. Whether you recognize it or not, your actions are based on rebellion to God, you arrogantly seek to create your own man-made religion. What blind ego!"

After further harangue concerning the war in Iraq, the World Council of Churches, Israel/Palestine, and Iran, the letter ends with this cheery salutation:

Therefore, I pray that you will change your direction. Right now you are causing the Presbyterian Church USA to commit suicide! I am praying that you will have a spiritual rebirth, a truly personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I am also praying that if you do not, you will be brought down and become ineffective. Your false teachings, your lack of Godly morality, ethics and insights is absolutely appalling!

You are I are no strangers to hellmouth. Some of us have come so close that we are almost afraid to whisper it.

I have to think that Job and his wife experienced hellmouth right in front of their closest friends;

that Noah and his family experienced hellmouth in the ark;

and that Abraham and Isaac experienced hellmouth on Mount Moriah.

And then the Bible gives us a perfect happy ending, such as this.

Abraham's chief servant is successful in finding a suitable mate for Isaac;

Rebekah says "I will" and returns with the servant to Canaan;

and to top it all off, Isaac actually loves Rebekah,

and is comforted after his mother's death.

How do we justify God's happy ending to a horrendous experience?

Theologians have tried for years and years to rectify the

existence of suffering and iniquity with belief in a

God who is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.

And there are no easy answers here.

But I will offer a few suggestions, a few wonderings, about this
capping of hellmouth with a neat and tidy series of fortunate events.

First, Jesus, the Messiah, God with us,

says "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened
and I will give you rest...rest for your souls." (Matt. 11:28-30)

We believe Jesus to be the embodiment of Isaiah's suffering servant:

the one despised and abhorred; (Isaiah 49:7)

the one smitten and afflicted; (Isaiah 53:7)

the one pierced for our transgressions; (Isaiah 53:5)

the one wounded for our healing; (Isaiah 53:5)

the man of sorrows, familiar with our suffering. (Isaiah 53:3)

And he can comfort us and give rest to our souls,

because Jesus knew hellmouth, personally, in its entirety.

You only have to look at the Gospels to realize that nearly 1/3 of each of them

pertain to the passion of Christ, to the last week of his life,

when Jesus fell into the burning ring of hellmouth,

in life and then in death.

When we say in the Apostle's Creed, "He descended into hell,"

we mean that Jesus knows, and God knows,

the extent of human experience from cradle to grave.

Our God has been to hellmouth and back,

not just for a brief visit, or for a vacation,

but to know our suffering and sorrows, and to deliver us from evil.

The Psalmist says, "The Lord upholds all who are falling;

And raises up those who are bowed down." (Ps. 145: 14-16)

And we can rest and take great comfort in that knowledge.

We can be confident in Christ, and in the saving power of Christ,

who will go to the ends of human experience to rescue the lost.

And lastly, I don't think the series of fortunate events: the rainbow,
the new livestock, or the perfect wedding,
are primarily about restoration in this life.

None of these are really satisfactory replacements for what had been before.

Isaac probably remains emotionally scarred
from his near-death experience;

Job still mourns losing his first family of seven sons and three daughters;
and Noah probably has anxiety attacks
every time it clouds up and threatens to rain.

Those who preach a prosperity Gospel might have us believe
that God will bless us with wealth and good things all our life,
if we trust and obey.

But I think the perfect wedding is indicative of something else.

I think it is more a hint and promise of things to come.

When we were in the mountains on vacation last week,
my husband and I were out hiking, and we came to a fork in two paths,
with a sign-post labeled "hither and yon".

It was meant to be humorous;
a momentary deliberation between here and there.

But I think this perfect little story of finding a wife for Isaac is less about hither,
and more about yon.

Bruce Reyes-Chow, the newly-elected moderator of PC(USA)'s General Assembly
has said, "It's about engaging in God's journey together,
and how in these brief moments we see glimpses
of the amazing Kingdom of God that we will experience
at the end of time."

(Bruce Reyes-Chow, "Hold On and Let Go: Being Faithful in a Post-Modern,
Culturally Creative World." November 7, 2003)

I think the perfect wedding, the perfect series of fortunate events,
is a just that: a glimpse of the amazing Kingdom of God
gaining another foothold.

It's one day in the year of the Lord's favor, which Jesus stands in the synagogue
and proclaims in his "Spirit of the Lord is upon me" mission statement.

It's about what has begun to happen, day by day, as believers
participate in God's mission on behalf of the poor,
the imprisoned, the impaired, and the oppressed,
who are struggling for a leg-up out of the pit, out of hellmouth.

It's misfortune giving way to good fortune, one day at a time;

It's misfortune and good fortune, giving way to God fortune all the time.

And we, as God's sojourning people are invited to be part of
this wondrous marriage

of our best efforts to be faithful trustees of God's liberating promise,
and, of God's compassionate, redeeming love for us,
for better and for worse.

Jesus has issued the invitation to

"Come unto me and be yoked in common ministry."

The flute is playing; the dance has started.

God has given us the freedom to respond. "Will we?" Amen.