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Rebekah - A Shaky Kismet - Rev. Seth D Jones

Scripture: Genesis 24-26

Rebekah is the daughter of Abraham's brother, Nahor, who also has a city named after him. In our story today, we begin with a promise made between Abraham and his servant, a promise made for the sake of Abraham's son, Isaac. Abraham and Isaac have not spoken to one another since Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac a few chapters back. Nor will they speak after this. Nonetheless, Abraham feels obligated to find a wife for Isaac, and so he sends his servant out to find said wife among Abraham's kin, but not among the Canaanites, who live around Abraham.

In the women of the Old Testament, we see stories of promises made and broken, deep concerns for a world that is out of balance, and profound insights into the nature of God. An emerging theme, for now anyway, from the women of the Bible tells us we are thinking way too small about ourselves and about God and about what God wants for us. We see that God's will is worked out through human beings and we see that the will of human beings is a thing of value. We begin to see that, through these women, in our lives with God and with one another, we are dealing in possibilities rather than dealing with answers.

Let me pull you into my personal fascination with the concept of infinity for a moment. Infinity is a mathematical idea, first and foremost. Whole numbers exist on an infinite spectrum. There is no end point to the number scale. Imaginary numbers, fractional numbers, and prime numbers exist on infinite spectrums as well. The great mathematician, Georg Cantor, proved that there can be orders of infinity. In other words, an infinite set of numbers can be contained within a larger set of infinite conditions. Infinities upon infinities.

Geologically, infinities exist when we try to measure coastlines. The Greek philosopher, Zeno, stated that if one were to set out on a race, and the racer also had to measure the distance from the beginning to the end of the race by taking a measure at each half-way point between the beginning and the end of the race, the racer would never reach the end of the race, because a line is infinitely divisible into smaller halves. Because of this, North America, for instance, has an infinite coastline. All measures of the size of continents are estimates because of Zeno's infinite regression.

Theologically, we are dealing with infinities as well. In one sense, it is a meaningless idea because, as a student of math has said, *Infinity is where things happen that don't*. The way I like to put it is that *Infinity is the place where all things that could happen never happen*.

This, I realize, is sort of abstract and philosophical, but what stands out for me with Rebekah and Isaac today is that there are moments where the infinite meets the finite, where the omnipresent, omnipotent, infinite God meets the limited, hidden, local experience of the human

being. We have words for this experience, this divine meeting: fate, destiny, predestination. My favorite word for these moments, however, is *kismet*. Kismet is a Turkish word that means something like fate, or destiny, but it has a different flavor. Kismet means

the advantageous coming together of events and people for the betterment of all involved.

Kismet is a religious word, used by Muslims and Jews alike, to describe the alignment of this world with the will of God.

Sometimes, when the veil of our perception parts, the awareness of the finite human is opened to the presence of the infinite God who has created all things. William Blake wrote of this experience, saying,

*To see the world in a grain of sand,
And heaven in a wildflower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour*

This moment is the experience of kismet, the sensing of the coming together of God's will and ours in the vast realm of our lives. These moments can only happen in our limited, finite, time and space constrained world. When we speak of God, we are speaking of a being of infinity interacting, relating to, finite, limited beings. Kate and I spent a long time in New Age circles before we came around to the Christian way again. One of the sayings in those New Age circles was, *We are infinite beings having a finite experience*, or, *We are spiritual beings having a material experience*. These sayings have always bothered me.

Reading our story today, I am beginning to understand why these sayings bother me. Just from a logical position, infinite realms are very different from finite realms. The reason those sayings bother me is because saying "*infinite possibilities*" is really the same thing as "*no possibilities at all*". Possibilities can only come to fruition in a limited frame, in the realm of the finite. The wave of the past, the limits of one's mind, the boundaries of the body, the constraints of relationships based on traditions, experience, and worldviews, the physical laws of the universe - all of these govern which possibilities will come to pass in our lives. And yet it is within these constraints that the infinite God of all the universe interacts with us. In the meeting of the divine and the human, things come together in a moment that can take hold for all of history, which can influence generations to come. It is *as if* we are living into the infinite, but really we are just becoming aware that the limits we have placed on ourselves are so much smaller than what is actually possible for us through God. Living into **finite** possibilities means we must develop a taste for ambiguity and a life lived without answers to deep questions.

Now, in the atmosphere of these thoughts of infinity, listen to this moment in our story today. This moment I am about to read is the culmination of a promise made by a servant to his master for the sake of the son to whom the master has not spoken with in years and years, of a prayer made by a well which is answered with the arrival of a beautiful woman at that well, of a journey away from a known home and family to an unknown future with a person and family that has never been met. Listen to the kismet here:

⁶¹Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man; thus the servant took Rebekah, and went his way.

⁶²Now Isaac had come from Beer-lahai-roi, and was settled in the Negeb. ⁶³Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field; and looking up, he saw camels coming. ⁶⁴And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, ⁶⁵and said to the servant, 'Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us?' The servant said, 'It is my master.' So she took her veil and covered herself.

This moment of kismet is not answering questions of faith. It is fulfilling possibilities of the infinite coming into contact with the finite, of spiritual knowings becoming material truths, of complex people who have their own will and personhood aligning with the will of God. God doesn't create outcomes; God creates possibilities which can only become events and moments in this world.

People build entire lives on these kismet moments. But Rebekah shows us that we cannot live in these kismet moments all the time. These moments are shaky, and our memory, our experience of them, are shaded, elusive, yet true. The reason we cannot live in kismet all the time is because we are finite creatures. As Luther said, *The finite (us) bears the infinite (God) in this world.* And because we are finite creatures, things happen to us. Rebekah marries into a colossally messed up family. Her husband's dad, Abraham, almost killed her husband, Isaac, on the mountainside. Isaac has a brother, Ishmael, wandering around the wilderness somewhere, having been ejected from the household by his mother, Sarah. Abraham and Sarah's relationship has stories of treachery and deceit against kings in the background. They are broken, unreliable, dishonest people.

This is what Rebekah marries into. Next week, we will talk more about in-laws. Last week, though, I mentioned the DNA of relationships. Past family dynamics are very hard to break. We don't have any insight into the family Rebekah came from, but now that she is a part of this family, this ancestral story of the beginnings of our faith, she becomes woven into the dysfunctional DNA that surrounds her.

Soon, Rebekah will become pregnant with twins. The twins fight inside the womb, and after they are born, they fight outside the womb. Jacob is technically the second-born, but makes himself the first-born somehow. When they are teenagers, Jacob deceives his brother Esau to get the

household inheritance. After they become adults, Rebekah becomes the primary actor in a scheme for Jacob to cheat Esau out of the blessings of his father, Isaac, who is old and blind now. She dresses Jacob up in a sheep's skin to mimic Esau's hairy arms, and Jacob receives the blessing of Isaac instead of Esau, which means Jacob, the second-born son, receives all of Isaac's business relationships, all of Isaac's business transactions, all of Isaac's future. Rebekah makes this happen.

These are horrible family stories. The messed-up, unzipped, tightly wound DNA of Abraham's family continues all the way to the end of Genesis, where Joseph, Jacob's son, says to his brothers, who have sold Joseph into slavery and then, much later, discover Joseph has become the administrator of all of Egypt,

²⁰Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. ²¹So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them. (Gen 50)

What is important here is that the conflicts and deceptions of Rebekah and Jacob, the strained relationships of brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, countries and houses can be formed and aligned into the will of God.

We began all this talking about kismet, that moment when our will aligns with God's will for the betterment of all who are involved within the finite possibilities of this world. Kismet is not always an immediate experience. Sometimes it takes years to reveal itself. Or rather, God, being infinite, has no concern about whether God's will takes a moment or many, many years.

When God's will goes against our will, we call it fate, predestination. When our will aligns with God's will, we call it kismet, destiny. These are not answers; these are the ways possibilities formed in the mind and spirit of God come to fruition in our lives. And this is the way it is when our relationships and lives get wound up into a relationship with God and Christ. That alignment can only begin when we, like Rebekah, say "Yes" to the unknown, the unpredictable, and the mysterious.

They said, 'We will call the girl, and ask her.' And they called Rebekah, and said to her, 'Will you go with this man?' She said, 'I will.' So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his men. And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, 'May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes.' (Gen 24:57-60)

We say of Jesus in this tradition that Jesus is *fully human and fully divine*. There are all kinds of dogmas and theologies we could discuss about that statement, but what it really means is that Jesus is the possibility of God available to us, the possibility we have chosen to say “Yes” to, like Rebekah. That infinity of God winds and whispers through the finite and very human world we live in, where dysfunction, deceit, harm and hate, contempt and compassion all spiral out into moments where we are either aware of God’s will working in our lives, or we are not.

These stories, and our divine meetings with God in this life, are not answers to our great spiritual questions, but they show us possibilities that exist for each of us in our own ways. We are all individuals with our broken pasts, broken relationships, broken worldviews, just like Rebekah’s family. The kismet we seek is shaky even when we are aware of it, but like Rebekah, let us say “yes” to the unknown, and ride into the desert, the wilderness, and trust that, at least for a moment, God’s desire for us will align with our desires for ourselves and we can share in moments of grace and peace and love, just as Isaac and Rebekah do at the beginning of their story together.

Amen