

# WATERING CAMELS

Sermon, July 9, 2017

Texts: Genesis 24:34-46; Matthew 11:25-30; Romans 7:15-35

Isaac, the only legal son of a wealthy father, sole heir to a massive fortune, was a most eligible bachelor. He was also sole heir to a spiritual legacy, as God had promised his father Abraham he would be father of a great nation, and that through Abraham's descendants, all the nations of the earth would be blessed (*which Christians believe was fulfilled in Jesus, a descendant of Abraham*). It's understandable Abraham wanted his future daughter-in-law to be chosen carefully. Abraham wanted his son's lifetime companion to share his beliefs, his convictions, his traditions, and also to pass them down to their children. So, shortly after Abraham lost his beloved wife Sarah, he took steps to make this happen. He sent his chief servant on a journey to Abraham's home town to find a match for his son, a journey of some five hundred miles (*although this servant is not named in this chapter, it is believed to be Eliezer from Genesis 15, but we're not sure ... for our purposes this morning, I'll use that name*). Today's lectionary text is a summary re-telling by this servant of all the events recorded earlier in this chapter.

We are told in the first half of the chapter that Eliezer organized a caravan of TEN camels, made the long journey to the town of Abraham's roots, and then went to one of the common gathering places for women in that town ... the local watering hole. All he had to do now was meet some eligible young lady, figure out if she would be a good match for his master's son, then persuade this young lady and her family to accept his master's son sight unseen, and leave her homeland, her country, her people, her family and go far, far away to marry a man she's never met ... that's all he has to do! So, he wisely decides he better pray (*the original here is verses 12-14, later summarized in verses 42-44*). "*O LORD, give me success today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. May it be that when I say to a girl, 'Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,' and she says, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels too'-- let her be the one you have chosen for Isaac. By this I will know you have shown kindness to my master.*"

Eliezer asks for a very particular sign, a sign that would reveal something extraordinary about the character of this woman. Why would this sign be so revealing? Well, as mentioned during the Time with the Children, it was no small task to draw water for thirsty camels! I've read that a thirsty camel who has come a long distance and has emptied that huge inner reservoir of water can drink from twenty to thirty gallons of water in a little over ten minutes ... and there were **ten** camels! <sup>1</sup> And this particular young woman offers in verse 19, "*Drink, and I will draw water for your camels too, until they have finished drinking* (*emphases added*)." That means this woman is offering to keep drawing water with her one water jar until all ten camels are sated ... that's a *minimum* of two hundred gallons of water (*that's forty of the five gallon water jugs we use for our two water coolers*), and may be up to THREE hundred gallons (*or sixty jugs*)! And, as you can read in verse 20 what is perhaps more important, she carried through with her offer and did it! That is no small feat! So, the answer to Eliezer's prayer would be a resourceful woman who not only had the good health, physical strength, and determined work ethic to undergo such a task, but she would also be a gracious woman who hospitably and diligently offered much more than what was asked for to a stranger in need ... AND she carried through with it! After Rebekah finished watering all the camels Eliezer approached her, and the rest is history ... she went on to become the wife of Isaac.

I think Eliezer knew something about what constitutes good strong marriages. I think he knew that the best marriages consist of two people who go out of their way to graciously, lovingly, willingly and diligently *do* the unasked and the unexpected, two people who graciously, lovingly, "water the camels" in their homes and marriages without being asked. In the larger picture, the Bible celebrates people who are willing to go the second mile, people who freely do more than what's expected, people who graciously and joyfully and diligently look for opportunities to put their love and words into action and serve beyond what is asked. Such people are often used by God for His divine purposes.

When Rebekah said those words (*"I will water your camels"*) and followed through, something clicked in God's immense plan of redemption, and she ultimately became an important link, a huge link, in the divine chain of God's plan for the salvation of the human race, as she would go on to continue the family line that would bring to this world the Savior! Of course, she didn't realize all this at the time, but that's the point. The people God uses are precisely those who are more than willing to selflessly do more than what's expected, people who are more

<sup>1</sup> References vary between 20 & 30 gallons; most I've consulted put it at 30 ... see <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/weepingcamel/thecamels.html>

than willing to selflessly go the second mile, people who are more than willing to selflessly "water the camels," whatever they might be. When we graciously, diligently and selflessly carry out our good intentions and do above and beyond what is asked and/or expected, we, too, might wind up fitting in as a link in a divine chain of salvation. Not only do we become better people, better spouses, better neighbors, better employees and employers, but we become better potential partners with God in the salvation of the world around us and the people we encounter and serve, if for no other reason that we do make the world around us a better place.

When we've looked at this passage in past years, I've recalled the familiar proverb, *"The road to hell is paved with good intentions."* One meaning of this proverb is that well-intended acts can often have disastrous results, many if not all of us know from at-times bitter experience. Perhaps, though, the more common meaning of the proverb is that people often intend to do good things, but much of the time they do not make the effort to actually do those things at all. *"I kept meaning to (fill in the blank), but I never got around to it."* Unlike Rebekah, too many of us never go the first mile, let alone the second mile! As the proverb intimates, merely intending to do good without following through is, at best, of no value, and at worst, can lead to destructive, even hellish, ends.

Interestingly, the original proverb is, *"Hell is paved with good intentions."* There is no prefatory *"the road to ..."* I find that an interesting contrast with Heaven, where streets are paved with **gold** ... solid, substantial, valuable, precious gold! Hell is that empty, value-less, unproductive, dreary and ultimately destructive place "paved" with deeds left undone, promises left unkept, dreams left unfulfilled, commitments not carried out. There is a very real sense in which the way we live and what we actually DO helps determine what kind of pavement will be under our feet for eternity ... but that's almost another sermon.

The hellish pavement of good intentions ... I think that's at least part of what Paul is writing about in today's reading from Romans. *"I do not understand my own actions,"* Paul writes, *"for what I want to do I do not do, but I do the very thing I hate. ... For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing."* Paul isn't just speaking about himself; he is describing the universal human condition. Human sin, human depravity, affects everything and wreaks havoc with our good intentions. In the Presbyterian tradition, we call this the doctrine of Total Depravity, meaning that sin has infected every aspect of human endeavor. By Total Depravity the theologians don't mean that we are rotten to the core, as if there was no vestige of good in us at all, or that we can't ever discern right from wrong. Indeed, there is *much* good in us. After all, we were made by God in the image of God, and God is good (*all the time!*). God's announcement at creation is that we, too, are good – very good. But shortly after that announcement, something went wrong. Sin entered the created order with a power to so distort and corrupt things that you and I now not only find it extremely difficult to consistently do what we know to be right, but we often do the very things we did not want to do. Paul is writing about people like himself who would like to be good rather than bad, right rather than wrong, loving rather than abusive, generous rather than stingy. In short, Paul is writing about people with good intentions.

He continues, *"So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. When I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For in my inner being I delight in God's law, but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind. ... What a wretched man I am!"* Paul then poses this question: *"Who will free me from this body of death?"* And then, Paul goes on to answer his own question: *"Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord."*

To expand on his concise answer, Paul infers Jesus alone can and will free us from this inherent, infectious human depravity. Left to ourselves, we are trapped. Armed only with willpower, we will lose. The remedy is not merely more willpower. The remedy is for us to acknowledge our weakness and ask help from Jesus Christ, Who promises us in our Gospel reading, *"Come to Me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me ... you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."* In the very little time remaining, I just want to point out a yoke performs two major tasks: (1) it enables the master to direct a creature, using and channeling and directing that creature's strengths to produce beneficial, rather than destructive, results. And (2) a beast of burden is often yoked with another, in order that their *combined* strength can perform tasks the one could not do alone. The "yoke" of Jesus performs both these tasks. As we come to Him, as we learn to follow Him, He calls forth the best in us, enabling us to utilize the best of our abilities and strengths to bear our burdens and perform our duties and to carry through with our intentions to do *good*. He harnesses our strength under His guiding hand. And He not only guides as the Master, He also simultaneously and graciously comes up alongside us and YOKES HIMSELF TO US ... in order to help us bear things we cannot bear on our own, strengthening and empowering us to use our gifts and strengths in productive and good and beneficial ways.

In short, yoked to Christ, following Him in all our actions and decisions along the way, He gives us power to do well, He frees us to serve and to carry out our good intentions ... even to water camels.