

Sermon July 9, 2017 “Thankful Testimony” Philippians 4:2-9 Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

Imagine this: You are the trusted servant of Abraham. He is weakening and knows his life will soon end. His son, Isaac, has turned forty and still has no wife. So Abraham called you into his presence and asks you to swear that you will personally go to the land where Abraham grew up and find a good wife for his son.

You hesitate: “Uh, what if I find a good woman but she will not come with me? Do I come back here and then take Isaac with me?” Abraham squashes this idea: “No, Isaac must not go there! He must stay here! If the woman will not go with you, you are free from this oath.”

So you take the oath, promising to follow Abraham’s orders. You take ten camels laden with choice gifts with you, and head out on a long journey. When you finally approach the city of Nahor, you’re wondering how in the world you will find the right woman, and so you turn to God, asking for success, and specifically asking God to have the right woman offer not only to give you a drink of water but to offer to water your ten thirsty camels. And guess what?! It happens just as you asked for it to happen!! Talk about relief and thanksgiving!! You realize that God was with you all through the whole challenging endeavor. And you go to meet the young woman’s family.

The parts of the story we read from Genesis 24 tell what happened next! The servant was so thankful that he told the girl’s family (she was named Rebekah) the story, emphasizing his prayer to God and God’s hand in it all, how Rebekah offered to water all those ten camels (no small job!), and how he blessed God for leading him to the right woman. He then asked to take her to Isaac, and we heard how Rebekah immediately agreed to go, which shows us she was gutsy as well as a strong young woman. Rebekah and the servant went back to the promised territory, and the Bible shares that beautiful story of Rebekah and Isaac falling into a love that gave Isaac comfort and strength.

What are we to glean from this story? I believe that it is a testimony that God really is with us, seeing what is possible far beyond what we can grasp, and willing to guide our steps and our longings if we will only ask God for help. The servant was actually given a pretty impossible mission. He was loyal to Abraham, but how could he have known which woman to choose for Abraham’s son without HUGE help from God? No way!

His response was clear as he dealt with the family of the perspective bride: he told them the whole story of how God helped, and he showed his thankfulness.

Too often in our lives today, we are slow to share our testimonies, and perhaps even slower to let ourselves recognize the ways God has brought us through challenges and hard times. The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Philippian Christians, told them as he sat in jail that they should discipline themselves so that in *every* circumstance they would give thanks to God. Today’s lesson also included a plea that two of the women in the Christian fellowship in Philippi should would to get along. So Paul, even though he was in prison, knew what was going on. He knew that even though folks are Christian, they don’t always see eye to eye, and they often forget to treat each other with love and respect. Elsewhere in his letters, Paul warns against gossip and anger and grudges and disrespecting another, and all those things that can tear a congregation apart and certainly diminish

the witness of the congregation. Pray over this situation, church, Paul said, and help these two come together. Good for us to hear and heed.

A church is only as powerful in its witness as its members are able to show love for each other, love for God, and love for others. Several years ago a man was going through a tough time in his life. He had no job, he kept being denied SSI. He was really down. He went to the soup kitchen of an inner-city church and was given a wonderful meal. Deeply appreciating the food, he stayed to help clean up. He found himself deeply troubled by the arguing and ugliness of speech that occurred among the workers during the clean-up. He came to my office shaking his head. "Pastor, that church does such a good job feeding people, but when I stayed after to help, it was awful! There was one person who could not seem to say anything positive, complaining and criticizing folks who didn't seem to be there. I left there never wanting to go back, in spite of my appreciation for the fine meal. The attitudes turned everything good into something very sour."

And Paul suggested to another imperfect group of followers of Christ, "Rejoice in the Lord always! Let your gentleness be known to everyone...The Lord is near. Don't worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." And guess what? The peace of God, which passes every circumstance and all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus!!

Don't we need that peace!! We are in the midst of a time when there seems to be a huge shortage of peace and a huge shortage of thanksgiving. And this leads to a world on edge and people who are angry before they even look each other in the eye, if they even bother to do so. We are caught in a valley of blaming others; it's as though the only way we can feel at all good about ourselves is to tell how much worse someone else is. This kind of swamp is not the way of Jesus Christ, and it certainly conveys no thanksgiving or peace or love to others.

Abraham's servant faced a hard challenge, but he did so keeping his relationship with God as his mainstay. Instead of griping about his assignment, he asked God to help him, and God did, and then in thanksgiving and relief the servant quite openly shared what God had done to help him.

We face hard challenges in our lives and some of you have a lot of things you can legitimately complain about. But God asks us to look higher, above the hardships and the illnesses and the disappointments and all the times others have let you down or stabbed you in the back, to the fact that God is with you and loves you and can see you through anything you face, even death. We talked about choosing life last week. This week I guess it boils down to whether or not we will give thanks for our lives and share that thankfulness with others. That's what God wants, and that is the way to find peace in the midst of any storm and unexpected blessings in the midst of this adventure we know as life.

You see the hard paths ahead. May you also see the hand your God offers you along the way. Amen.