

COMFORT ENOUGH
Genesis 24: 34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30
Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time • July 5, 2020
by Pat Berger

As we drop into our Matthew reading for today, it sounds to me as if Jesus may have been having "one of those days". "People!" he might have growled. What are you going to do with them, anyway? This generation, he said, acts like a bunch of . . . children! (And we need to remember that, in Jesus' time, children were precious little more than annoyances. They were messy, they were noisy, they had to be fed and housed and clothed, and they produced no income.) God had sent to them John the Baptist, and the church leaders -- the ones who would have been thought to be "the wise and the intelligent" -- gave John all kinds of grief, and then God gave them Jesus and they didn't want to listen to what he had to say, either. They could do it themselves, thank you just the same. Sound like anyone you know?

Anyway: after this little rant, what did Jesus do? He prayed. And the prayer was not a rant; he did not begin -- as some of us might -- ". . . and furthermore . . ." No: Jesus began this prayer by saying, thank you. Thank you, that the things you would have me say to these people are hidden from the wise and the intelligent, and are clear to the infants. The wise ones act like children; those who are infants understand as wise ones could if they would. It is likely that Jesus' use of the term "infants" here referred to those who were following him and were getting it, so probably those who had been ill and Jesus had healed them, those who had been hungry or thirsty and he had cared for those needs, those who had needed a listening ear and Jesus had provided that. These have continued to follow him, as have some others and the disciples, and their faith may have been in its infancy but at least they were getting it. And Jesus continued his ministry with them. The focus for his work, always, was those who were in need, those who had no power -- the ones for whom the wise and intelligent would have no time. For these who followed, Jesus offered comfort -- not that their lives would be easy, but that the promises of God were for them.

This might be easier for us to relate to now than it has been at any other time in our lives. The COVID virus, at this point, seems to be one that doesn't want to be managed by any human being. People who know about viruses and such are working, and working hard, to change that. Perhaps before very many more months, there will be a vaccine -- BUT: how long will it protect one, and will it work for all ages and ethnicities? And: now the disease seems to be mutating; they may have to go back to square one. We aren't used to this; we aren't accustomed to not being able to fix, somehow or other, whatever is broken.

And yet. We aren't without hope. Take my yoke upon you, Jesus said. My yoke is easy and my burden is light. Yokes, I learned, were a very carefully made instrument at that time. The farmer would have needed his oxen to be healthy and very strong, and as comfortable as was possible as they pulled their loads. The yoke would likely have been carefully and caringly made by a skilled carpenter, to specifications given him by the farmer who knew the load that would be pulled, and then fitted exactly to each animal. The oxen did heavy work; it was important that the yoke help them, not hinder. That is what Jesus said to his followers that day, too; if they would take his yoke upon themselves, and learn from him, they would be able to handle, and capably, the burden that was this ministry. They would not be given a yoke that did not fit. All they needed to do was follow, and claim those promises: comfort enough.

It seems to me that following and claiming promises is what was happening in our reading from Genesis for today, too. Last week, we heard one of my least favorite stories from the Bible, the one about Abraham preparing Isaac to be sacrificed but then -- thank goodness -- God providing a lamb for the sacrifice at the last moment; Isaac was not sacrificed, and Abraham would, indeed, have descendants. This week, it is clear again that God's promise to Abraham of generations to follow was in process. It was time for Isaac to find a wife. Actually, Isaac was 40 years old -- in that time and place, it was almost past time for Isaac to find a wife or to do anything else. Isaac's mother Sarah had died at age 127, and this reading tells of the transition of the patriarchy from Abraham to Isaac.

Each one of the participants in this story is necessary to its outcome. Unlike those in our reading from Matthew who couldn't seem to understand or act on what Jesus was telling them, these people worked together, and by doing ordinary things -- and doing them together -- God's promises were claimed. Abraham's servant was sent to the land of Abraham's father to find a wife for Isaac. God would make sure that the servant found the right woman. As the servant came close to his destination, he stopped by a spring, and he prayed. Might just the right woman, he prayed, come to draw water, and give him a drink, and also provide water for his camels. Rebecca, as it happened, came to the spring to get water; the servant asked for a drink, and Rebecca offered water not only for him but also for his camels (and we will appreciate this more when we remember that she only had a water jug, and a thirsty camel might drink 30 to 50 gallons of water at a time, and there were 10 camels!). And: we read that she hurried as she did all of this. Rebecca may indeed have been beautiful, and surely another of her qualities must have been great strength!

The servant was quite well impressed, and he gave Rebekah many gifts and put a ring on her nose, and asked her family to send Rebekah with him. They asked Rebekah if she would like to go -- this opportunity to choose would have been most unusual -- and she agreed to go, whereupon she was given more jewelry.

Rebekah and her maids got on their camels, and headed out with the men. When they arrived where Isaac was living, Rebekah looked up and saw Isaac coming toward them. Most versions of the Bible say that she slipped quickly from her camel; the Hebrew actually reads that when she saw him, she fell off her camel! I guess she was impressed. She covered her face; Isaac took her to his mother's tent and loved her. And our reading tells us, "Isaac was comforted after his mother's death." Ordinary people worked together for God doing ordinary things, and the result was: comfort enough.

God did not speak in this story, but Abraham spoke to God, the servant spoke to God, and Rebekah's family spoke to God. They were all privileged and they knew that, and they knew that covenant with God was the reason. None of that made it easy, and I think that is where the yokes and burdens about which Jesus spoke converge with this story. Sister Joan Chittister said in one of her lectures that the greatest burden in life is to have no burden. We have walked alongside Abraham as he learned what kind of burden it was for him to be God's chosen leader, the yoke that he would wear. The servant felt the gravity of his task. He prepared well for the trip, prayed, waited for God's response (his yoke), and watched for signs that he had listened well. And Rebekah: my goodness. After she watered 10 camels (speaking of burdens), she agreed to go to a land she had never seen to marry a man she had never seen. "God's will is discerned in prayer and by observation," wrote one commentator, "and God's steadfast love is demonstrated through human action."

We, too, are ordinary people. And I don't know for sure about you, but most days most of what I do feels pretty . . . ordinary, and that would be because it is. Our yokes, though, have been made just for each one of us, just like the ones Jesus talked about for his disciples and other followers. God created each of us just as we are because we are the ones God needs. Think for a moment of who you are and of things you do for those around you and those not so close around you whose struggles are huge and whose needs we can only begin to meet. I can only do what I can do; I can only be who I can be; but what I can do I must do, what I can be I must be, as must we all. And when we respond faithfully to what is asked of us as often as we possibly can, what does Jesus say? Jesus still says to each one of his followers: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Comfort enough.

Let us pray.