

Filling Sarah's Tent Genesis 24, selected verses

When I was in junior high I was told by my youth group leaders that God had a perfect plan for my life. This caused me more difficulty than you might expect. I had only recently come to the conclusion that boys were not as gross and barbaric as I had previously thought they were, at least, not all boys. Some truly were Philistines, but others, well; they were pretty cute and kind of fun to be around. And that's where my first theological struggle began: what if the guy that God had picked out for me to be my husband was really gross? What if, in God's perfect plan, he had assigned me someone that I couldn't stand? It was a thought that kept me up at night.

I hesitate to tell that story because it really gives you an idea of how backwards I was in junior high, but it also betrays my naivety about how God works, and what I thought being a follower of Jesus would be like. When I heard them say that "God had a perfect plan for my life," a person picked out to be my life's partner, a life's work, my friends and hometown and even my house all chosen and laid out for me from the beginning of time, what I envisioned was a kind of conveyor belt, where these things just rolled my way. My path in life would be perfectly clear. It would be easy. I wouldn't need to think about what I was supposed to do, or what God wanted from me, or who the people were that God wanted to be significant in my life. It would all just come to me. They would be sent to me.

Now, I will admit that from time to time that has been the case. I am convinced that there have been a handful of things have fallen straight from the hand of God and into my lap, probably because God was either tired of me yelling at him that a little clarity would be nice, or he figured I was too dim-witted to get it on my own. But you and I both know that that is normally not how it works. God might have some kind of master plan for our lives, or at least a few major roads and a some specific points of interest he wants us to take, but a clear word from God about what we are supposed to do just isn't easy to come by anymore, is it? Burning bushes and angels and talking donkeys just don't make the kinds of appearances they used to, and that's too bad. It's hard to get your marching orders wrong when they come to you that way, when you are trying your best to figure out if you are supposed to stick with a job that has become monotonous or intolerable or stick around because you are supposed to learn something, it would be nice if the answer came out of your cat or the ficus tree in your living room. When you are trying to decide if you should choose the major you love, or the one you know will get you a lucrative job, it would be nice if the crystal clear answer came to you in a dream one night. When a friendship has become toxic and you aren't sure if you should end it, or if God needs you to be a true friend to a difficult person who needs a true friend, it sure would be nice to have the answer given to you in a manner that leaves no doubt in your mind. More likely, though, you will be left to toss and turn and question and wrestle with your decision for a while, maybe even an agonizingly long while. And then take a leap of faith and do what you think, hope, pray, is the right thing to do.

For all intents and purposes it looks like that is exactly what Abraham has done. It looks like he has just taken matters into his own hands. Isaac, the promised Isaac, has been born, survived nearly being sacrificed, and is now well on his way to middle age. But at no point in the past couple of decades has God ever said to Abraham, “Go find a wife for Isaac.” Abraham just arrives at the conclusion that the time has come for Isaac to settle down, and he goes into action.

And actually God quit making appearances to Abraham a good while back, and really, he only spoke directly to Abraham a handful of times to begin with. Once the covenant was established and Isaac was rescued, that was it. No more word from God.

But they still had a deal, didn't they? They still had that pact, the covenant: God would bless Abraham with a nation, a multitude, as many descendants as there were stars in the sky! But one kid does not a multitude make. There would need to be grandchildren. Then great-grandchildren. Then great-great-grandchildren. But God wasn't talking anymore; there were no more visits from celestial strangers, telling Abraham what to do next, but to Abraham, it was obvious. If he was to be faithful to his covenant with God, Isaac was going to need a wife. Sarah's now-empty tent would need to be filled with a new matriarch, so the family could go on, so God's covenant would be fulfilled. And so Abraham sends his servant off, not to find a local Canaanite girl down the street, but home, to his kin, to the people he knew would be faithful to his God. He sends him off with a blessing and with the assurance that God will be with him in his endeavors.

Most commentators would say that this is a story about the continuation of the covenant, but it's clearly also about discernment. How do you know what God wants you to do, where God wants you to go? It isn't always clear, in fact it rarely is. Most of the time all you get is that first push out the door, an initial direction to head in, a “go to the land I will show you” kind of direction. *Here are your gifts and the things that bring you joy in life – do something with them that will glorify God and serve the greater good. Be a church that lives for others, not itself. Lay down your life for a friend.* And then you are left to take it from there.

That doesn't mean that God's ditched you and gone off somewhere else, or that it doesn't matter what you do. But doing it exactly right may not be the most important thing. If it were, God would just mail you your marching orders and expect you to get to it. But blind obedience isn't the goal. God doesn't just want us to learn to follow obvious, hard to miss orders. Working your way through it is part of learning to follow God. What God wants, I think, is for us to learn to be attentive – to pay close attention to the Spirit's stirring inside us; to learn to think, but to think the way he does; to learn to use our common sense, but our Christian common sense, which actually isn't so common. What God wants is for us to exercise our spiritual muscles, our faith. Anyone can learn to follow orders. God wants us to become attuned to him, to develop an intimacy with him.

This story has a lot in common with the books of Ruth and Esther: God is nowhere to be seen in it, but his fingerprints are all over it. God is invisible, but very, very present –

Abraham expects it. Abraham trusts that God is in the story, in the very mundane, everyday events of the lives of humans.

I will be the very first to admit how frustrating it is to feel like you're never really sure where God is taking you, which direction you are meant to be going in. There are times when I long for the olden days, for those burning bushes and unmistakable voices that come in the dead of night, when God insistently calls your name and tells you exactly what's on his mind. But isn't it exciting to think that instead of dictating our every move, or giving us such crystal-clear orders that we feel more like slaves than beloved children, God invites us to be his partners on this journey? It's not a matter of getting it right or messing things up for good. It's an adventure. It's a companionable journey. God's not trying to make things difficult for us. God's trying to draw us closer. It's a work of labor, for both of us, but it's a labor of love.