

SERMON FOR AUGUST 6, 2017

Her name was Rivkah. She lived in the village of Bethsaida Galilee, on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. She was 42 years old when this day happened. She was married to Saul, her husband of 27 years. He fished the Sea of Galilee, with Bethsaida as his home port.

The two were happy enough together. And both would say that, even with the tough times, they raised four happy children, each now married and each with babies of his/her own. Grand babies, Rivkah knew, were a blessing.

Their worst time came when the Romans confiscated the small plot of land that the family farmed. It was just an acre and a half on Galilee's fertile plain, but it supplied vegetables and some grain for the family's use. And it was enough land to raise a goat or two for milk and meat.

One sad day, the Roman governor's henchmen visited all the plots of land that were owned by the locals. The government took over the title to each farm and required the people to pay rent for land they had once owned. The land tax gobbled up any profit Rivkah and Saul made and robbed them of the little security they had. Now they struggled to meet Rome's demands and often were in debt to the local money lenders for loans to cover the land tax and the head tax levied on each citizen of Roman-occupied territory. They had always worked hard, but now they were slaves to the emperor. Their financial worry made them angry and anxious and they took both out on one another.

Saul dealt with his fear and frustration at the synagogue. He was at worship every Sabbath, part of the group of men who led prayers and read Torah. Every chance he got, Saul studied with the Rabbi and learned the sacred texts that promised Yahweh's strong hand in the lives of the chosen people. Saul learned hope from the great story of the Exodus from Egypt, the story of Abraham's willing journey away from the familiar to God's destination, the story of the great prophets who worked to keep the people faithful in troubled times. Worship and study gave Saul's life a focus on the possible, on the future, on Yahweh's presence in the present moment.

Rivkah had no such support. Oh, the women talked among themselves, but not about Yahweh. They talked about domestic things, children, meals, washing and cleaning. They talked about the present, what was real in the moment. There was almost no talk about spirit or faith or Yahweh.

Women were not allowed into the conversations about faith and meaning. They had little role in the synagogue. They were not included in the study of scripture. They were not encouraged to learn and they were not encouraged to lead. Rivkah did her best by eavesdropping, always listening in when the men met in her home. As she prepared the meal, she kept her ear tuned to the conversation, gleaning whatever bits of information she could, wrestling with whatever questions the men were asking. She wanted and needed more.

So, when Jesus appeared on the scene and when Saul and the other men started talking about this Jesus, the itinerant healer and teacher, Rivkah became

very interested. And when she heard he was coming to Bethsaida, she knew that she had to go and listen. She worked hard to get her chores done, to have Sabbath food prepared according to custom. And on the day of Jesus' visit, she joined a huge crowd of people who came to meet this man whose reputation preceded his presence. She sat and listened to him, and was welcome to learn. And he spoke to her heart about the power of love that is stronger than death, of care for the least, about the need for justice and peace.

When Jesus chose to move up the coast of Galilee in a boat, the crowd followed him on land. It seemed as though he wanted to be alone, but he looked out at the crowd and felt tenderness for them. So he stopped. He healed the broken who were seeking wholeness. He spoke to those who were seeking solace and comfort. He taught them about a kingdom other than Rome, the kin-dom of God where people were loved, where people were honoured, and where people were welcomed. Jesus brought Rivkah such hope that she stayed and listened until the sky turned mauve and pink with evening.

Then the most astounding thing happened. Jesus said that it was time to feed the crowd, to satisfy their physical hunger before they began the walk home. He got everyone to sit on the grass in groups of 50 or 100. He took some bread and a few fish and suddenly a small family meal was enough to feed them all. Rivkah did not know how Jesus made a little into a lot, but he did. He did not send the people away to fend for themselves. He did not expect the women to get busy and cater the crowd. They, she, sat with the men and

received what the men received. She was offered satisfaction the same way the men were offered satisfaction. It was as though she mattered for who she was, not how well she could serve.

When the story of the feast went around Bethsaida, Rivkah took delight in the words, "5000 men were fed, as well as women and children." She could scarcely believe it. She held onto that day, to its promise for her life, for the confidence it gave her about her human value, for the courage it gave her and her neighbours as they struggled with Rome.

Of course she enjoyed the meal. But more precious was her spiritual satisfaction and the bond she felt with her neighbours. In a time of scarcity, they experienced enough. In a time of oppression, they knew freedom of mind and heart. In a time of doubt and fear, they learned the power of hope. These, thought Rivkah, are the true miracles because they are the ones that abide.