

## **Series: A Journey with Jacob**

### **#3 “Jacob’s Family”**

We have been spending our summer with Jacob and his family. Each week Ted and I are telling part of their story, and this week the saga continues. As so often happens in life, what we think we know inside and out, what is familiar, often has new meanings when looked at again. Children like to hear their favorite stories over and over, and we too, hear our story of faith over and over. The life of Jacob is certainly too long to read or tell in one week, even in 4, but it is too good to miss. Here is what has happened so far ...

Jacob and his brother, Esau were at odds from the start. When they were born, a red and hairy Esau emerged first, with Jacob grabbing at his heel. From the very beginning, Jacob wanted to be first. As the boys grew, Esau was the outdoorsman – he hunted and brought home game, much to the delight of his father. Esau was content to be outside with the animals, while Jacob would rather stay at home with Rebekah, his mother. It was after one of those hunting trips when Esau returned famished when Jacob played what may have been the biggest trick yet on Esau. Stirring the pot of stew over the fire, Jacob told Esau he could have some, if he gave Jacob his birthright - -the rights to his inheritance. Esau was as hungry as Jacob was sneaky, and so he agreed. That may have been the most expensive meal Esau ever ate! Time passed, and Isaac’s

wealth increased. Esau married, and we read that he and his wives made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah, his parents. One day, Isaac tells Esau that the time is coming for him to prepare to die, and he wants to pass his blessing along to Esau. Esau says nothing about the deal he and Jacob made so many years ago, and instead goes hunting to prepare a meal to eat with his father in order to receive the blessing. Rebekah and Jacob plot, and Jacob uses his culinary skills to prepare a meal. Rebekah schemes and wraps him in animal skins so he will feel and smell like his brother. Isaac is fooled, and Jacob receives the blessing – a permanent act that cannot be undone. Esau is not exactly thrilled with this turn of events, and becomes angry. He becomes so angry that he threatens to kill Jacob, and Rebekah sends him to live with Laban, their uncle. Along the way, Jacob stops to spend the night in the middle of nowhere. Using a rock for a pillow, he falls into a sound sleep and dreams of God. His dream is one of a ladder and the angels of God ascending and descending to him from heaven. He hears the voice of God tell him that God will be with him always and bless the families of the earth through him. Jacob awakes as a man in the midst of a change. The self-centered trickster stops to give thanks to God, and sets up an altar – the stone anointed with oil – to mark the place. While his promise to God is an if-then promise - -if God will be with me and provide for me – then the Lord shall be my God – it is a change in how Jacob encounters the world, and God.

Jacob continues on his journey, arriving at the land of his uncle. He sees Rachel, his uncle's daughter, for the first time, and is smitten. He shows off for her by moving the heavy stone that covers the well where the animals will drink, and waters her animals for her. Rachel goes and tells her father of his arrival, and Jacob stayed with Laban for a month. This brings us to the scripture for today... we enter mid-story with Genesis 29:15-28 – listen now to the word of the Lord:

### **Genesis 29:15-28**

*<sup>15</sup>Then Laban said to Jacob, “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?” <sup>16</sup>Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. <sup>17</sup>Leah’s eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. <sup>18</sup>Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” <sup>19</sup>Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.” <sup>20</sup>So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. <sup>21</sup>Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.” <sup>22</sup>So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. <sup>23</sup>But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. <sup>24</sup>(Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his*

*daughter Leah to be her maid.)* <sup>25</sup>*When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?”* <sup>26</sup>*Laban said, “This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn.* <sup>27</sup>*Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.”* <sup>28</sup>*Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife. This is the Word of the Lord.*

This is an account of reversals. To use the cliché it seems every commentary author used when discussing this passage, the trickster has been tricked. The tables were turned on Jacob, and he was now on the receiving end of what he had dished out to Esau and Isaac. Jacob tricked Isaac, substituting himself for his brother, and Laban now tricks Jacob, substituting one daughter for another. Today’s encounter involves daughter, not sons, but the birth order is still of the utmost importance. Laban tells Jacob he substituted Leah for Rachel because the youngest daughter is not ever given in marriage before the oldest. Jacob, who had little regard for the law of the firstborn receiving the blessing, now has to abide by the rules that the eldest daughter must be married first. Jacob, who was used to doing the deceiving sees that he has been deceived when the morning after his wedding, he discovers he has not married the woman he thought he did.

Given Jacob's past, we might expect him to try to worm his way out of this situation. Perhaps he would try to negotiate for Rachel, or try to manipulate the situation to his advantage so he can have what he wants. After all, that's what he did before with Isaac and Esau. This time he had waited and worked seven years for the woman who caught his attention that day at the well. He had labored and served, not in the position of a family member, but rather as a hired hand for Laban. Jacob does what we might least expect – he accepts the situation and after the weeklong wedding festivities are complete for him and Leah, he serves Jacob for another seven years in order to marry Rachel.

There is quite a bit in this passage that is culturally based and seems strange to us today. While we cringe to think about marrying cousins, which is what Jacob did, in those days, according to Jewish scholars, it was seen as a way of safeguarding “purity of blood, tribal property and the welfare of the daughter”<sup>i</sup>. The fact that Jacob is taking Rachel as a second wife is not considered strange to those who first told the story, though it is a concept that is foreign to us. Polygamy was an accepted practice during this time. We do not get to see or hear the story from the perspective of Rachel and Leah. Unlike Rebekah when she married Isaac, these two women do not have a choice or say in the matter. They are given to Jacob and must remain with him. Again, this seems strange and outrageous to us today but was a part of life during the time of

Jacob's life. These details, set in context, help us to see that some of what we may have thought was outrageous behavior on Jacob's part – marrying a woman who had no say, marrying multiple wives, and marrying first cousins were all acceptable practices in that time.

So here we have Jacob, married to Leah and promising to work another seven years for Rachel. The deal is set, and Jacob continues to work for Laban. Seven. More. Years. The text tells us that the first seven years went fairly quickly - verse 20 says, *“<sup>20</sup>So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.”*. What were the next seven like? At least he and Rachel were together this time, but a lot can happen in seven years.

Think back for a moment to the year 2004 – seven years ago. That was the year Facebook was founded, and the memorial for the second World War was dedicated in Washington DC. The summer Olympics were held in Athens, - Greece, not GA - and Hurricane Charley killed 27 people in Florida. That was the year that LOST premiered on television, and the Boston Red Sox won the World Series for the first time since 1918, defeating the curse of the Bambino. In 2004, Pat Tillman, the Arizona Cardinal Football player who served in Afganistan was killed, and we mourned the death of Ronald Regan. In movie theaters we were watching the Passion of the Christ, Meet the Fockers, National Treasure, the Incredibles and Harry Potter and the Prisoner of

Azakaban. Here at FPC, things were different too. We were in the midst of building the education building. That year the Pre-School met at Heritage Baptist Church, and the After School Program met wherever space could be found, including the session room. There was no Middle Service on Sunday morning. How about in your world? The high school seniors that begin their last year this week were entering middle school. Parents who graduated from college perhaps are now sending their eldest children to school for the first time. Seven Years ago this summer I was completing my Clinical Pastoral Education unit in Houston Texas – serving as a hospital chaplain and getting ready for my final year of seminary.

Do the last seven years seem to be “but a few days” to you, or do they seem longer? Can you imagine giving them in work for the love of your life, only to be told that you had to do it again? It has been said that the human body replaces all of it’s cells every seven years. If this is true, then the Jacob who entered into the contract with Laban for Rachel was not the same man who realized he was deceived. Seven years later, something had changed. Jacob was indeed different. He did not try to scheme his way out, but rather agreed to do what he had to do. Perhaps seven years was long enough for Jacob to transform in his heart as well as in his body. The dream he had changed him – he opened himself to the work of God, and God was working in Jacob.

God was not only working through Jacob to change him, but also through this entire family. As the child of divorced parents, I'm grateful for the story of Jacob and his family - it makes the most dysfunctional families seem a little bit better. None of us can say that we are from a perfect family. Some of our families have issues and conflicts and family dynamics that mirror or echo Jacob's own. In this story, parents and siblings operate from a place of competition and deceit. Jacob marries into a family that is just as dysfunctional – Laban tricks and manipulates Jacob to get what he wants – his eldest daughter, Leah, the one with eyes that were described as “weak” or “lovely” to imply that she was not beautiful was snuck into the marriage with Jacob. The beautiful Rachel is used as chattel as well, for Laban to accomplish what he wants. 14 years of free labor in exchange for his daughters does not sound like a bad thing to him. This is not a family many of us would willingly want to be part of.

And yet...God is present with this family. God does not give up on them. God works with and through all of them – just as the cells in Jacob's body changed over those seven years, the possibility of how he is in relationships changes as well. God is at work in this mess of a situation. The verses immediately following today's reading speak of this. Leah, the first daughter married, was hated by Jacob. Yet she was blessed with the ability to have children with her husband. Rachel the beautiful is loved by Jacob, and yet for her conception is almost impossible. Echoes of Rebecca's anguish can be

imagined. As Leah continues to bear children, one after another, we can imagine how strained the relationship between the two sisters may have become. Rachel envied her sister, is what we read, but those feelings may have been deeper than that. God is in this situation – blessing them with children through their maids - another one of those strange practices that was common for the time. The children born to Rachel and Leah are the ancestors of the tribes of Israel. God is keeping God's promise to Jacob to bring forth the nation of Israel. From the drama of anger and lies and betrayal and competition found in this family story, God brings forth something good.

Our scripture reading from Romans pairs beautifully with this story – nothing can separate us from the love of God. Not even families full of conflict or strife or sibling rivalry. God is in the middle of them all and at work. God transformed Jacob, and God can transform us. If God can work with the family of Jacob to bring forth the nation of Israel, imagine what God can do with our families. Once again today, we see that God shows up in the most unlikely places with unlikely people doing unlikely things, and keeping God's promises. It was with his dream that Jacob allowed himself to be open to the possibility of transformation and change, and we do indeed see him a changed man. No longer completely self-serving and self-centered. The Jacob who stole his brother's blessing would not have worked 14 years to marry the woman he loved. If God can work with this family and create transformation, then surely God works with us in our own

lives and our own families. There is a prayer practice called the examen. At the end of each day, we ask the question: where was God present today, and where was God absent. When I was a child, we would go around the dinner table and tell the best part of the day, and the worst part of the day. This is similar. In lifting up where we saw God at work each day, we remember that God is faithful to us. How many days when Jacob served for Rachel did he have to wonder where God was? How many days did he give thanks for seeing her, for having a meal with her, for the love he had with her. I invite you to try the practice of examen this week and look for the paces you see God at work. Like Jacob, you may find God where you least expect to, and find you see God at work in the most unlikely places, with the most unlikely families doing unlikely things. We can indeed give Thanks to God for that. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup>JPS Torah Commentary 203