

Foundational Stories Series
And the Trickster Gets Tricked...
Sermon on Genesis 29:1-35 (8/2 & 8/3/14)
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So...our journey through the book of Genesis has now brought us to one of Genesis' more uncomfortable stories. As this story was read a few minutes ago, I hope some of you were thinking, "Now what in the world is she going to say about *this* story?!" Because that's what I've asked myself any time I have preached on it.

Before we get into this week's story, however, I want to get us up to speed with where we've been so far in this *Foundational Stories* series these last many weeks.

We started with the story of Creation in Genesis chapter one and then we skipped ahead many chapters and began learning about Abraham and Sarah's family – their son, Isaac, along with Isaac's wife, Rebekah, and their twin sons, Esau and Jacob.

What's most significant about this family is that God and Abraham had made some promises to each other. God invited Abraham to follow, Abraham said "yes" to God, and then God made a three-fold promise to Abraham.

Now, some of you have been here each week of this series...so I'm going to test you on this three-fold promise. It's congregational pop quiz time: What are the three parts of God's promise to Abraham? Anyone who knows any of the three parts of the promise can just call them out...

[Part 1 = land...part 2 = descendants...part 3 = blessing.]

Yes, that's right. The first part of the promise God made was that Abraham would receive the land we now call Israel.

The second part of the promise was that Abraham would have many, *many* descendants. And the third part of the promise was that these descendants would not only be blessed, but that the world would be blessed through them.

Perhaps most importantly, the promise that undergirded this three-fold promise was that God would be with Abraham's people forever – a promise God reiterated to Jacob in the story we heard last week about Jacob's dream of the ladder between heaven and earth.

Now, before getting into today's story, let me also just remind us about Jacob's behavior thus far in Genesis. See, even before he began life outside his mother's womb, Jacob was scrappy...he was something of a fighter. But he didn't really fight fair.

Jacob was smaller and weaker than his twin brother, Esau, but he didn't let that stop him: though Esau was born first, Jacob tried his darndest to get out first. The name Jacob means “heel” and he was given that name because he was literally grabbing at Esau's heel in an effort to be born first.

Jacob didn't win that fight...but, along with his crafty mother, Rebekah, Jacob managed to steal both the birthright and the blessing that rightfully belonged to his older brother.

That his scrawny little brother tricked him out of his birthright and blessing so enraged Esau that Jacob had to run for his life away from their family home.

It was while he was on the run that Jacob had the mysterious dream about the ladder between heaven and earth...a dream in which God reminded Jacob of the promise made to his grandfather, Abraham – a promise that God was now determined to continue through Jacob.

That, my friends, brings us to today's story – and today's story is quite the doozy of a story. Again, it's perhaps one of the more uncomfortable stories in the book of Genesis. For a whole host of reasons...some of which I won't even bother to mention explicitly.
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So...Jacob is on the run from his own household after tricking his brother and father into giving him the birthright and blessing that belonged to Esau. Things are not good. His parents have told Jacob to head to Rebekah's brother's place a ways away...and to find himself a wife while he's there.

So Jacob arrived in Haran, the eastern land where Rebekah's brother, Laban, lived with his two daughters – Leah, the older, and Rachel, the younger. As Genesis tells it, Leah's eyes “didn't sparkle” while Rachel was “beautiful and had a good figure.” Another translation of Genesis says Leah had “weak” eyes, while yet another says she had “lovely” eyes. But, however Leah's eyes looked, *Jacob's* eyes fell onto Rachel.

Laban invited Jacob into his household and Jacob began working for him. After Jacob had been living and working with Laban for a month, Laban asked Jacob what he'd like the wages for his work to be. Jacob, being the crafty young man that he is, told Laban that he would like *Rachel* to be the wages for his work: he would work for Laban for seven years and, at the end of the seven years, Jacob would marry Rachel.

Laban agreed to this plan, Jacob worked the seven years, and then, at the end of the seven years, Jacob essentially said to Laban, “Okay, pal – time's up: give me your daughter!” (I thank God the culturally accepted rules of chivalry and marriage have changed a bit since then...)

Anyway, Laban then threw the marriage feast and, somehow, he sent Leah to the marriage *bed* instead of Rachel...and for these people, in that time, it wasn't a beautiful ceremony with emotional vows and prayers that made the marriage official: it was what happened in the marriage *bed* that made it official.

And, though I cannot for the life of me understand how, Jacob did not figure out what Laban had done until morning light shone through the window of the bedroom...so, as the story goes, Jacob awoke to the surprise of his life: he had spent the night with – and had thus *married* – the wrong sister.

Jacob ran to Laban, crying, “What is this you have done to me? I served you for *Rachel* – why have you deceived me?” Laban responded – I imagine him being very cool and calm – saying, “It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. Finish *this* daughter's bridal week; then we will give you the younger one also, in return for another seven years' work.”

It is quite the story.

We've got first cousins getting married, an uncle who goes back on a pretty significant promise, a young guy who doesn't figure out until morning that the girl he'd intended to marry was *not* the girl he'd spent the night with...we've got one guy marrying multiple women, and, of course, we've got *women* whose voices clearly do not matter in the midst of it all.

(In case you ever hear people preaching about the importance of biblical family values, please keep in mind that *this* is one of our biblical families!!! And I'm not sure many of us would choose this kind of drama as a family value...)

In case you are wondering, it is not the easiest story in the Bible to write a sermon on...let me tell you that.

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Since it's such a challenging text to preach on, I took to Facebook to see what my friends there thought about the story. I wanted to have a little fun with it, so I asked my Facebook friends what clever title they would give to this story...I think you'll enjoy some of the ideas. My friends offered these possible titles:

“A Tale of Two Sisters” ... “If At First You Don't Succeed” ... “Wife Swap” ... “Why Methodists Don't Drink at Weddings” ... “A Case for the Necessity of Lawyers in Marriage Agreements” ... “The Real Housewives of Haran” ... “Waking Up with Leah” ... “Under Veil Number 2” ... “Desperate Tent Wives” ... “I Thought the Bible Taught Monogamy” ...

The mother of one of our McCabe Church families – whose two daughters happen to be named Leah and Rachel – posted, “[Just] don't call it 'the story of Jennifer's daughters!’”

One friend – who preached on this text last week – titled his sermon “Taking a Second Look at Leah.”

I do love the idea of a sermon centering around Leah – or both Leah and Rachel – because, as I said, the perspective of the women in this story is virtually absent.

(If you are interested in imagining Leah's and Rachel's perspective on life with Jacob, I'd encourage you to read the novel *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamat.)

In fact, it's worth noting for us Christians that *Jesus* is from the line of Judah – and Judah was one of *Leah's* sons with Jacob. Our Lord and Savior is descended from the line of the unwanted, unloved wife. Interesting – don't you think? But a little more about that later...

Anyway, of all the responses my friends offered to my Facebook question, the title idea that struck me the most was this one: “The Trickster Meets His Match.”

See, people who've been paying attention to the stories of Genesis thus far, might read this story and think, “Ha! Jacob got what he deserved: he tricked his older brother out of his birthright and blessing...then he got tricked into marrying the wrong woman.” And the trickster gets tricked...

Actually, I find it really fascinating to think about the fact that Laban was Rebekah's brother...recall it was Rebekah – Jacob's mother, Isaac's wife – who helped Jacob trick Isaac into giving Jacob Esau's blessing.

So I'm thinking that manipulation and trickery ran in that family...that what goes around comes around for this crew. And isn't that just the way it goes? It's really kind of surprising Jacob didn't see something like this coming – don't you think?

I mean, his mother – Laban's sister – was not exactly the most honest, upstanding woman...so why should Jacob have expected Laban to be an honest, upstanding man? Because he was *family*? Nah. Jacob should have known from his *own* behavior toward family that blood doesn't mean anything when it comes to treating someone fairly.

And we all know this, too, right? We are sometimes made painfully aware that family ties, or close ties of friendship, don't always mean your family and friends will treat you well...or that you will treat your family and friends well. Blood can run pretty thin sometimes.

In this day and age, we may no longer allow first cousins to marry ... in this day and age, we pay far more attention to both men's *and* women's perspectives when it comes to relationships and marriage ... and, in this day and age, we typically do not allow one person to have multiple spouses.

So there are differences between the “back then” of today's story and the “now” of today. But. We can't let those differences between then and now cause us to miss the translatable principles of this story.

For example, we would certainly be angry if someone pulled a stunt on us that was on par with the stunt Laban pulled on Jacob. And, while a person probably couldn't get away with the *exact* stunt Laban pulled on Jacob, don't try to tell me families and friends never try pulling one over on each other nowadays.

Every family has their issues. Every family has those pieces of their story they are not proud of...or that they shouldn't be proud of. Every family has the skeletons in their proverbial closets. And, now – just as it was back then – what goes around comes around...we will reap what we sow.

If we are tricksters in any way, shape or form, it's guaranteed that the tricks will come back to haunt us someday, in one form or another.

But the lesson we take from this story can't simply be a lesson in the Golden Rule: treat others the way you want to be treated...though certainly that lesson is in here somewhere. //

The Holy Bible is the story of the relationship between God and God's people...and, in every story of the Bible, we *have* to look for what *that* story is saying to us about God. And that – right there – is what makes it hard to preach on this story.

Well, actually, the ridiculously bad behavior of the people *in* this story is the main reason it's hard to preach on this story.

But, the other reason it's hard to preach on this story is that *God* is barely even mentioned in it. In the 35 verses of today's reading from Genesis chapter 29, it is not until verse 31 that God makes an appearance.

And this is what verse 31 tells us about God: “The Lord knew that Jacob loved Rachel more than he did Leah, and so he gave children to Leah, but not to Rachel.”

These words don't say much about God, but what they do say is pretty powerful. “*The Lord knew that Jacob loved Rachel more than he did Leah, and so he gave children to Leah, but not to Rachel.*”

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Now, please keep in mind this is a situational statement about God: this statement about God in Genesis 29, verse 31, is not meant to be a sweeping statement about people who struggle with infertility. That God allowed Leah to have children before Rachel does not suggest anything about God's care or plan for people who struggle to have children *today*.

All we know about what this means is what it means for *this* story. And, even there, we can only take it to mean exactly what it says: that God offered Leah the gift of children because, unlike Rachel, Leah did *not* have the gift of Jacob's love.

The love Jacob showed to Rachel was a gift from God – Jacob's love was a way God's presence was being demonstrated to Rachel.

We understand this similarly today, right? We experience God's love through the love and care of other people – spouse, sibling, parent, child, friend, colleague, etc.

Well, Leah did not have the gift of Jacob's love...so God had to be present to her in another way – and God chose to give Leah the gift of children as a way of sharing divine love with her.

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First and foremost, this story serves as a reminder that God's love and presence remains with us even when we behave in despicable ways. God had promised to fulfill the covenant made with Abraham...and God did not go back on that promise when Abraham's descendants behaved badly.

(Now, please note that God's continued presence with people who behave badly is *not* meant to give us permission to behave however we want to behave. We were not created to take advantage of God's grace. But that's another whole sermon right there...so I'll just leave that at that.)

See, I think there is something in today's story about God's particular care for the downtrodden.

“The Lord knew that Jacob loved Rachel more than he did Leah, and so he gave children to Leah, but not to Rachel.”

And not only did God give children to Leah, God kept giving children to Leah's children's children...all the way down the family line to Mary, *Jesus'* own mother.

Surely Leah would not have known that the Savior of the world would eventually be born through her children...but that is absolutely huge. There is more hope than I can even begin to imagine in this – that through the unloved sister eventually came Jesus Christ. Amazing, right? //

So, please: do not ever forget God is with those who are unloved in this world...sometimes you might feel like that's you. But God is there – bringing steadfast love and hope, now and always. Thanks be to God. Amen.