

**Genesis 29:15-28** “When morning came, it was Leah!”

**Romans 8:26-39** “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

**Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52** “Have you understood all this?”

## Is This Really Happening?

**O God in whom is heaven, grant us the wisdom, the strength and the courage to seek always and everywhere after truth, come when it may, and cost what it will.**

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus offers an array of parables, one right after another, which announce a kingdom of heaven that is “subversive, unstoppable, invasive, a nuisance, urgent, shocking, abundant. It requires action and commitment and inspires extreme behavior.”<sup>1</sup> I wonder if, when Jesus was teaching about the realm of God – the kingdom of heaven, he was thinking of the stories in Genesis of the patriarchs. They were, like most of the characters of the Bible, not people you would necessarily want to teach children to emulate. They were questionable characters – shady, duplicitous, cheaters and deceivers. Do you know that *every* significant story in the book of Genesis involves deception? Our reading from the 29<sup>th</sup> chapter this morning is no exception.

We’ve been hearing consecutive portions of Genesis over the weeks this summer, so perhaps you have a sense of the story of Jacob. Jacob has cheated his older twin brother Esau out of his birthright and later stole Isaac’s blessing by taking advantage of Isaac’s poor eyes and dressing up like Esau. Then he ran for his life because Esau was mad enough to kill him. On his way to seek refuge with his mother Rebecca’s brother, Laban, Jacob spent the night in what he took for a God-forsaken place, using a stone for a pillow. But when he dreamt of angels of God ascending and descending a ladder between earth and heaven, and of the Lord standing beside him reiterating the promise given to his grandfather, Abraham, and his mother Rebecca, of offspring and protection and land, he awoke and marked the spot by pouring oil on the pillow stone. He consecrated it Beth-el – house of God – saying, “surely God was in this place and I, i did not know.”<sup>2</sup> And Jacob then made a vow to God, saying, “If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you.” It was Jacob’s promise of a thanksgiving offering.

Then Jacob arrived in the land of his mother’s brother, Laban. Before he found Laban, though, he came to the town watering place, the well where his grandfather’s servant first encountered his mother, Rebekkah. Unlike his grandfather’s servant, however, he was not bearing gifts. He was a fugitive and he was empty-handed. He learned from some shepherds that the well had a capstone on it that was so heavy that it could not be moved until all of the flocks had arrived at the end of the day to drink and the shepherds all lifted the rock together. This was a custom to

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to my seminary classmate Laurel Dykstra for this great summary. Also, see my sermon for Proper 12-A from July 27, 2008 on the Emmanuel Church, Boston web page: <http://www.emmanuel-boston.org/sermons.html> in the sermon archive.

<sup>2</sup> See Lawrence Kushner’s *God was in this Place & I, i did not know: Finding self, spirituality and ultimate meaning* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1991).

ensure community well-being with equal access to the water. But the story goes that when Jacob laid eyes on Rachel, with superhuman strength, he moved that rock by himself and he watered *her* flock without waiting for the other flocks and shepherds to arrive. No matter that he just offended all of the other shepherds in the community by moving that rock. (He was his mother's boy. It was Rebekkah who demonstrated incredible strength and determination to water ten camels the last time we were at this well!) Then Jacob kissed Rachel and promptly burst into tears, weeping aloud! It's really quite a scene! Rachel rushed home to her father, Laban, who welcomed his nephew with open arms. Jacob stayed for a month, working for Laban, when Laban asked him how he could pay him for his labor. It's in the context of Laban's warm welcome and generosity that our portion of Genesis picks up today.

The story continues that Jacob offered to work for seven years to earn Rachel as his wife. Laban agreed, failing to mention that he wasn't sure what he would do about Leah, who was older and should be married first according to custom. Perhaps he thought seven years was plenty of time to find a husband for his oldest daughter. There is a traditional midrash<sup>3</sup> that Leah had been promised to Esau who never showed up, so defeated was he by his younger brother. The text tells us that Leah had lovely eyes. The meaning of the adjective describing Leah's eyes is actually uncertain, and through the centuries, interpreters have debated the translation. In addition to "lovely," translators render the word as "weak" or "tender" or "sensitive," some as "timid," or even "exquisite!" What we know is that there was definitely something unusual about Leah's eyes.

I don't think that because Jacob found Rachel beautiful, that means that Leah was not beautiful. We do not need to imagine that the sisters were pitted against each other. In her wonderful book, *The Red Tent*, Anita Diamant imagines that Leah was actually helping her frightened little sister out when she slipped into the darkened wedding tent in place of Rachel, where she was too veiled or Jacob was too drunk for him to notice the switch. Perhaps Laban was covering his daughters' honor (both of his daughters' honor) when Jacob accused Laban of deceiving him and he did not deny it. It's not surprising that Jacob would *accuse* Laban of deceiving him; Jacob himself was the master of deception, so of course he would jump to that conclusion. Although Laban is traditionally characterized as crafty and greedy, there's really nothing else in the biblical narrative before this point to suggest that Laban was anything other than honorable and doing the best he could by his daughters.

Even if Jacob didn't get it, the trick echoes the firstborn birthright and blessing issue between Jacob and Esau and we know that the trickster has been tricked. Laban permitted Jacob to also marry Rachel as soon as the first wedding feast of seven days is over, provided that he worked another seven years. This isn't as unreasonable as it might sound to our ears – especially if Laban didn't know how the trick happened in the first place. And Jacob didn't really have a place to go anyway; he was scared to death of encountering his brother Esau. During the second seven years, plus another six that Jacob worked for a share of Laban's livestock, Jacob and his four wives (each sister came with a maid who also became a wife to Jacob) had eleven sons and one daughter. The story goes that the names of the children reveal the emotions of the sisters as they navigate the tricky territory of being married to Jacob. (When the Law was handed to Moses, it included a prohibition for a man to marry the sister of his wife while his wife was still living.<sup>4</sup> Some

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<sup>3</sup> Midrash is an ancient form of rabbinic storytelling that explains and fills in the gaps that exist in the Biblical narrative. Midrash is looking between the lines and, if necessary, under the rugs.

<sup>4</sup>Leviticus 18:18

commentators have understood this story to be an illustration of the reason for the rule.) All four women were daughters of Laban. All four were sisters.

Although the two wives of Jacob who had been maid servants are written right out of our liturgical and teaching traditions, Zilpah and Bilhah's children were counted as equals in the twelve tribes of Jacob. It's classism that keeps them from being named and celebrated as matriarchs along side of Rachel and Leah. But they have not been completely forgotten. In a dictionary of Hebrew acronyms, the first letters of their names in this reverse order, Bilhah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Leah, (BRZL or Beit, Resh, Zayin & Lamed) create the word barzel which is Hebrew for iron.<sup>5</sup> So, as I suggested a few weeks ago, that when the ancestors of our faith are cited, it should be "Abraham, Rebekkah, and Jacob." When the spouses are included, the list should be "Abraham and Sarah; Rebekkah and Isaac; and Jacob, Bilhah, Rachel, Zilpah and Leah." In our ancient Biblical tradition, we have three patriarchs and six matriarchs of the Twelve Tribes: men who wore their shortcomings on their sleeves and women who were as strong as iron.

If the most pressing question of Biblical study is, as I often say, not "did this really happen?" but "is this really happening?" (which is a variation of the question, "what difference does this make"), then how is a story like this happening in our own lives (inside us, inside our parish, in our communities, in our country?) What do we know of working hard for many years and then having the rug pulled out from under us? What do we know of not getting what we bargained for or what we expected? What do we know of deception – of deceiving ourselves and others, of being deceived or of jumping to the conclusion that we have been deceived? And what do we know of love at first sight? Of love that takes many years to grow? Of generosity and hospitality that is appreciated or taken advantage of? What do we know of surprise and honor and beauty in the midst of a mess? What do we know of the Holy Immortal One moving through our own narratives with forgiveness and promise and blessing in spite of everything? In other words, what do *we* know of the "subversive, unstoppable, invasive, urgent, shocking, abundant" kingdom of heaven?

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Wyner Mark, "The Four Wives of Jacob: Matriarchs Seen and Unseen" in *Reconstructionist*, September 1, 1998.