

Waking up with Leah (Genesis 29:15–28)
Pastor Hubert at Pinegrove UC, July 30 2017.



Who'd have ever have thought that juicy soap opera stories of a dysfunctional family with sibling rivalry, passion and sex, scheming moms and dying dads would become... sacred stories one day? Sacred stories, not about holy people and their devout lives, but about flawed and broken people and the fantastic mess they make of their lives. Losers, has-beens and wannabees like you and me – and how God works through them.

Last week we heard how Jacob had to run away from home to save his skin because he has cheated both his older brother Esau and his dying father Isaac. And now a seriously ticked-off Esau is out to kill him. While on the lam, Jacob has this vision in which God tells him that he is blessed – blessed, in the middle of this mess? – and that he will be a father to a great nation that will *be* a blessing to *everyone* on earth. But of course for this to happen, Jacob had better find himself a wife first. How he gets one – not to mention gets his own comeuppance – is quite a story.

So how *does* Jacob find a wife? Not Jewish dating online, but in the same place where his father Isaac found *his* wife, Jacob's mother Rebekah: at a local watering hole – and no, not that kind of watering hole: a public well. I guess wells were the dating sites of those days.

When Jacob gets there, he sees that the well is covered with a massive stone. In fact, the stone is so big, the shepherds usually had to wait until the others were there, so together they could all lift it to water their sheep. That way, the well could not be monopolized by just one shepherd who would use up the precious water before the others came; now, they had to work together. Just then, a young woman approaches: it's Rachel, with her large flock of sheep.

Given the kind of guy Jacob is, it's not clear if he's more impressed by her wealth (the large flock of sheep she brings), or by the fact that she was easy on the eyes. Probably both...

At any rate, he gets so excited he singlehandedly lifts the stone off the well. By doing that he undercuts the long-held local practice to wait for each other and work together. But hey, anything to impress a pretty girl, right?

And it seems to work, because Rachel takes Jacob home to meet his dad, who also happens to be his uncle. Nice guy that uncle Laban is, he offers Jacob a job.

A month goes by, in which Jacob gets tired of walking into tent poles while staring at pretty Rachel, so he proposes, not to Rachel but to Laban. And in typical Jacob fashion, what he proposes is a deal: Tell you what – “I’ll work for you for seven years if you give me your daughter Rachel as my wife in return.” You can tell how absolutely thrilled Laban is with Jacob when he says: sure, why not. Better you than some outsider.

Seven years go by, and the only excuse the author gives us for telling us nothing about those long years is that they seemed to Jacob just a few days because of his love for her. So maybe there is a romantic side to him, after all.

Finally, the wedding day – the day Jacob has been waiting for for so long. And after much feasting and drinking, Jacob winds up in a tent in the dark with a woman whom he thinks is Rachel.

Did I mention that Laban has not one daughter, but two? There was pretty Rachel of course, *and* there was her older sister, Leah. According to the Hebrew text, there’s something about Leah’s eyes. The text is unclear; what it literally says is that they were “tender”. It’s not clear if that means lovely, or weak, or crossed, or short-sighted; that’s why you’ll find completely opposite translations in different versions of the Bible. We just don’t know.

At any rate, the next morning Jacob is in for quite a shock. When he opens his eyes and rolls over to his new wife for maybe another roll in the hay (or tent), he looks straight into... Leah’s weak eyes! Uncle Laban had pulled a “bait-and-switch” on him.

This is where anyone listening to this story would howl with laughter. The cheater had been cheated, the trickster had been tricked. And how!

Of course Jacob hits the ceiling and protests loudly, Laban responds with a dry, oh, dear; did I forget to tell you our custom in this marriage thing? So sorry! Well, you may certainly marry my other daughter, too, but only after an additional number of years of service. How about, oh, another seven years? In other words, “Bam – got you, sucker!”

Juicy as this story is, by modern standards, there’s much in it *not* to like.

One, Jacob is marrying his first cousin, which is illegal in our day and age for good reasons.

Second, he marries not just one cousin, but two of ‘em, making him a polygamist, also illegal now for good reasons. And by the way, he doesn’t just stop there; later in the story he also marries their female servants, making it four wives.

Third, these women did not have any say in what happened to them; basically they were considered and treated as objects, property. That’s the way it was in that time and place.

So be careful when you say you’re in favour of a “biblical marriage”; there are some things about that “old time religion” that are simply unacceptable for us now. We need to remember, sometimes the Bible is *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*. The Bible doesn’t

always tell us how we should live, sometimes it just tells us what went on in those days. And in this case, what went on there was pretty, let's say... interesting?

If you want to know how it all turns out, go home and read the next few chapters. I guarantee it's a riveting read, with even more passion and sex, cheating and double-dealing, narrow escapes, triumphs and heartbreaks.

So what do we in the 21st century learn from this ancient ribald tribal story? I think there are a few things.

First, there's another story that's *untold*, and that's the story of the women. Sure, Jacob gets his just desserts, but really what it seems to tell us is it's not so much to be a man, the world's your oyster. If you happen to be a woman, you *are* that oyster – a commodity to be used and discarded.

Just re-read this story through the eyes of a woman, and you'll notice the macho bravado and posturing in it. It's all about "the male gaze", about being judged for your looks or how much money you bring in.

Then there's the expectation to produce children (male children, obviously), and the rejection when it doesn't happen. And let's not even get into the use of servant women in this story, women who are nonchalantly used for leisure and sex. Yes, it's in the bible, but there is no way to smooth it over or make it acceptable, not even a little bit. This is something we have to deal with, and accept that if God is love, then this is not how God wants us to treat one another, even if the men in the story say it's God's will. Of course they'd say that!

As I mentioned last week, God has a long track record of working through some pretty unqualified, un-holy people, and Jesus did the same thing. God and Jesus have this fondness for has-beens and wannabees, for hotheads and cheaters. People *we* would give up on and never pick on *our* team. People... like us.

But tell that to the women who bear the brunt of the stupid choices by the some of the dense people that God works through. Yes, bad things happen and people get hurt, good people and bad people; sometimes others, sometimes us. But that's not some supernatural god toying with us from above – that's life happening, and life can be unfair and cruel. Life just is.

But that's cold comfort when you're suffering the consequences of someone else's self-centredness, or a society that simply doesn't care.

God *does* care. God is right there with you when life threatens to overwhelm you. God is always here, even when we don't notice, as Jacob learned in that vision he had last week. "Surely God is here," he gasped, "and I wasn't even aware of it". God's plans for us will not be stopped by Jacob's *or* our selfishness or greedy choices. God's plans might be slowed down by it, but stopped? Never.

Little did Jacob, Rachel and Leah know that many centuries later a man would come and also sit at this same well and also encounter a woman who was rejected. But this

time, the man would treat her with dignity and respect, as the Gospel of John describes it in chapter 4, “the woman at the well”. This man was Jesus of course, and he broke the mold and showed us what God has in mind for us.

And the woman Jesus encounters says of him, “Come see a man who knows everything about me, and loves me just the same!”

Finally, the world began to change. Not from the top down by some royal decree or presidential executive order, but from the ground up – a grassroots movement! May we have the courage to also be changed from the ground up by this Jesus – and by stories as this one. There are still a lot of molds that need to be broken so God’s kingdom can finally break through into this world.

Amen.

Genesis 29:15-28 (Jacob marries Leah and Rachel)

¹⁵ Laban said to him, “You shouldn’t work for me without pay just because we are relatives. Tell me how much your wages should be.”

¹⁶ Now Laban had two daughters. The older daughter was named Leah, and the younger one was Rachel. ¹⁷ There was no sparkle in Leah’s eyes, but Rachel had a beautiful figure and a lovely face. ¹⁸ Since Jacob was in love with Rachel, he told her father, “I’ll work for you for seven years if you’ll give me Rachel, your younger daughter, as my wife.”

¹⁹ “Agreed!” Laban replied. “I’d rather give her to you than to anyone else. Stay and work with me.” ²⁰ So Jacob worked seven years to pay for Rachel. But his love for her was so strong that it seemed to him but a few days.

²¹ Finally, the time came for him to marry her. “I have fulfilled my agreement,” Jacob said to Laban. “Now give me my wife so I can sleep with her.”

²² So Laban invited everyone in the neighborhood and prepared a wedding feast. ²³ But that night, when it was dark, Laban took Leah to Jacob, and he slept with her. ²⁴ (Laban had given Leah a servant, Zilpah, to be her maid.)

²⁵ But when Jacob woke up in the morning—it was Leah! “What have you done to me?” Jacob raged at Laban. “I worked seven years for Rachel! Why have you tricked me?”

²⁶ “It’s not our custom here to marry off a younger daughter ahead of the firstborn,” Laban replied. ²⁷ “But wait until the bridal week is over; then we’ll give you Rachel, too—provided you promise to work another seven years for me.”

²⁸ So Jacob agreed to work seven more years. A week after Jacob had married Leah, Laban gave him Rachel, too.