

Sermon – August 2, 2020
“It was Leah!”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Genesis 29:15-28

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word. Amen

Good morning to everyone here in person and to those joining us on the live stream. For those on the live stream, please let us know that you are watching by leaving us a comment. For those gathered in person, I hope that you have discovered the Virginia Conference website link that allows you to send your intention to attend the service. It is by far the easiest way to meet the registration requirements the conference wants us to follow. Please consider using that capability as I think you will find it a means to help us and you meet the current requirements for in person worship. This morning we will celebrate Communion and will distribute the elements at the door as you exit. If anyone joining us on the live stream would like to receive Communion, please send us a comment and I will bring the elements to your door.

Before we dive into this morning’s scripture, there is an event in Jacob’s life that I think we should note before we move on in our journey from the site of Jacob’s ladder that we explored last week. After setting up and anointing the stone that he rested his head on, Jacob attempts to make a bargain with God. Jacob tells God that if God will indeed go with him, protect him, and bless his journey, then he will return to this land and give God a tenth of all that he has. Don’t miss that Jacob is still trying to set up a favorable situation for himself and does not yet trust completely in God. In his deal, Jacob is saying to God, “If what you promise comes true, then I will worship you.” Jacob is seeking to stay in control of his life. There is still more Jacob needs to learn about this God who has appeared to him. This challenge that Jacob has with trusting God is the same challenge we have today. Our response to God should be to worship him in all things and not test God to see if he will bless us before we give him praise and worship. It is often difficult for us in the midst of a storm of life to turn and praise God for his presence in our lives when everything within us cries out in anger, pain, and hurt. To seek God

in the storm and to trust God's plan is an aspect of living in the promises of God that we need to seek each day to live our life fully, especially in the darkest days when the storms rage. Jacob does not know God's plan, nor is he seeking to learn it, but he continues on with his plan to find a bride in Haran.

The details of Jacob's journey to Haran are not included as part of scripture. We know he makes the trip because the next stop in the scripture is a well outside of Haran. When we find people gathering at wells in the Old Testament, we should expect a marriage to follow. With Jacob's arrival at the well and the shepherds' response to Jacob's question that they know Laban, this part of Jacob's journey is over. Better still, at this moment, Rachel is approaching the well with the family's sheep. Jacob runs to meet her, greets her, and falls in love with this beautiful younger daughter of Laban. In this story there is love at first sight. We can also catch in Jacob's response here some praise to God for these events that seem to have been prearranged. Providence, God's hand, seems to be with Jacob as he finds Laban and his beautiful daughter whom Jacob now loves. We should keep in mind that Rachel has an older sister, Leah. The younger son of Isaac meets the younger daughter of Laban and desires her to be his wife, but the older daughter of Laban stands in the way of this desire, just as the older son of Isaac stood in the way of Jacob's desire for the birthright and blessing.

I hope that we remember Laban from Abraham's servant's earlier trip to Haran. On that trip, which was a long time ago, Laban and Rebekah's mother made the arrangements for Rebekah to be Isaac's bride. Now Laban again is part of the story of God's people as he interacts with Jacob. Notice that Laban runs to greet Jacob. He seems excited to greet and extend hospitality to this relative. Jacob has waited by the well and Laban claims Jacob as a member of his family and welcomes him into his home. After a month of Jacob working for his uncle, probably helping Rachel watch the sheep, Laban decides that he needs to change the arrangement with his nephew and approaches him to name his wages to work for his uncle. Jacob, who is very much in love with the beautiful young Rachel, suggests her as his wages. Jacob has not arrived with riches, he has no inheritance to lavish on a bride, so he negotiates with all he has, himself. He offers to work seven years for Rachel. Given what we know from documents for this time period, this is a very high price for a bride. Laban agrees to give Jacob a daughter in marriage. Notice in Laban's words agreeing to give Rachel to Jacob, Laban does not say, "I will give you Rachel for seven years of labor." Instead, he says, "It is better that I give her

to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.” Laban does not name Rachel in the agreement. This is a bit of foreshadowing of things to come.

We might find ourselves offended or taken aback by this idea of a bride price, or even the idea of a father selling his daughter to another man for a wife. The bride price is to pay for the woman to be cared for if she is divorced, or if her husband dies and there is no son to watch over her, or if she is mistreated. The bride price provides for her needs and allows her to live in her father’s home. The funds are kept by the bride’s family. This arrangement of marriage by the parents is another example where the parents are trying to make sure their daughters’ husbands are fit men and will care well for their daughters. These ideas are foreign to us today, but in this time, it was the necessary practice to provide for a successful marriage and insurance if there were difficulties. At the end of this discussion with Laban, Jacob thinks he has agreed to work seven years for Rachel to become his wife. Laban, on the other hand, has only agreed to give Jacob a daughter in exchange for seven years of service. Laban thereby lays the groundwork for his forthcoming act of deception.

Are we starting to feel like we are getting to know our ancestors a little? Are we beginning to encounter the lives of our ancient relatives? Jacob works for seven years, and they seem to him as only a few days. Love is a powerful motivator for us and for a God who loves us more than we can understand. That Jacob thinks Rachel is his wife is clear. We see this demonstrated when he goes to Laban on the day his seven years of labor are completed. Jacob does not ask for Rachel, but for his wife. In Jacob’s mind, Rachel is the wife he agreed to work for, and now with the labor part of the agreement completed, he comes and demands his wife that he may go in to her, an act which will complete his marriage. Laban does not reply to Jacob’s demand directly, but summons the people of the area to a feast. Now I cannot explain how it is that Jacob misses who he marries when the time comes after an evening of feasting and Laban brings Leah and not Rachel to the tent and Jacob goes in to her, but he does not realize until the morning that it is Leah. There are many ideas about what Laban does to deceive Jacob. For instance, some think there was an excessive amount of drinking at the feast and Jacob has celebrated too much. Others propose that it was dark in the tent and that Leah was heavily veiled. This event has been the discussion of Jewish Rabbis for centuries, and a midrash (a writing of Rabbis) that addresses Jacob’s failure to recognize Leah, holds that Rachel knew that her sister was to be given to Jacob and that Jacob had given to Rachel tokens to have with her so that he

would recognize her after a time of feasting in case her deceitful father tried to switch daughters. The Rabbis hold that Rachel did not want her sister to be put to shame in her wedding bed, so she gave Leah those tokens. Jacob having found them thought he was with Rachel. This midrash concludes that because Rachel was willing to sacrifice for her sister, King Saul is one of her descendants. A midrash is not scripture, but it does help us to realize that we are not the only ones who have encountered this event in our family history and wondered what happened. The point of this event, though, is not about Rachel and Leah, but about Jacob. The point for us is that while Jacob's ruse was pretending to be his older brother, Leah's, or Laban's, ruse, is for Leah to pretend to be her younger sister. Jacob has been deceived as he deceived his father, Isaac. Jacob is now married to his wife, Leah. Jacob the trickster is tricked. As they used to say in West Virginia, old age and treachery prevail over youth and vigor every time.

Can we imagine how angry Jacob is at this moment of discovery, when he wakes up and focuses on his wife expecting Rachel and it is Leah? Jacob has now received the surprise that he has given to his father Isaac and his brother Esau. Jacob is now as angry with his uncle Laban as they were and are with him. He is now living the surprise that he has given to others. Jacob is now experiencing the pain and anger that his actions have brought to others.

I think that a very angry and agitated Jacob goes and finds his uncle Laban and demands to know what his uncle has done. From my reading of the scripture, Laban now acts as the patriarch of the family and as an elder in the place where they live. He tells Jacob that in this place the younger daughter is not given in marriage before the older. Laban, who no doubt has been preparing for this exchange for seven years, offers that if Jacob will complete the marriage requirements with Leah, and work another seven years for him, he will also give him Rachel as a wife. Laban has no problem with Jacob being married to two sisters. Later, when the law is given through Moses, that law will condemn this practice. But in the time of the patriarchal narratives, the marriage traditions lack this restriction. Jacob is now alone in a foreign land with an offer of two wives and seven more years of work. He faces a relative whose actions are backed up by the elders, the other patriarchs of this place. He is far from his own family, and he has been deceived by his uncle into working another seven years. It seems as if our heir to God's covenant promise will not be returning to the Promised Land anytime soon, at least not for another seven years.

Some questions that Jacob may be asking himself now are, “Is God present?” or “How could God allow me to be deceived?” or “Who will help me in this time of difficult living?” or “Did not God promise to go with me and protect me and bless me?” and “Is this God’s blessing?” Jacob may not think that God is present at this moment, nor in the days to come, as he labors for his uncle. But God is in control and it is out of this difficult time in Jacob’s life, when he has learned firsthand what it is like to be deceived as he has deceived others, that God is at work to bring good out of what seems to be a mess. It is out of Jacob’s marriage to Leah and Rachel, and eventually to their two maids whom Laban gifted his daughters with on their marriage day, that God will bring about a great nation. And it is from these circumstances that God will bring forth a descendant who will be a blessing to all the people of the earth. Jacob is very alone at this moment, except for God’s presence, a presence that seems distant to Jacob. Jacob is beginning to suffer the consequences of his treatment of others as he is also being treated by a deceiver who has power over him. His deceiver is a relative whom he must now serve for another seven years. God may seem very distant to Jacob at this time and there is no indication that Jacob has yet learned some of the characteristics that God is looking for him to develop. Jacob will have time to look for God’s hand in his life as he serves Laban over the years. Jacob will have the opportunity to see God at work and to come to know God as his protector.

Jacob needs to learn to trust God to keep the promises God makes. Jacob’s expectation of how God works may not be the manner in which God is found at work in his life. This is our struggle in life as well. We tend to develop an expectation of how we think God should protect us and bless us as we live. But God’s ways are not our ways and our ways are clouded with sin. God is always at work in our lives to bring about good. Even in the darkest hour of our life, God is at work. We, like Jacob, easily see the hand of Providence when we think our meeting at a well with a beautiful woman is a blessing, but when we are deceived and fall, we tend not to see God at work in the darkness that surrounds us. Our challenge is to learn to look to the cross and see the blessing of Jesus suffering there for our sin that we might be reconciled to God and then praise God that he is with us even when we cannot perceive His presence. We suffer in life, but we do not suffer alone. God is with us. Christ is in us. Christ has promised to be with us always. Praise God for this wonderful promise.

Pray with me: Father, give us lips to praise you when we fall. Lord, give us a heart of praise even when our expectations for how you are to work in our lives is not met. Help us, Lord, to have eyes that search for the good you bring out of our circumstances, even those we see as difficult. Give us hearts of praise for all that we experience in our lives which we see as good and that which we see as bad. Change us, Lord, to keep our eyes focused on the cross and to know that you are with us always till the end of the age. Amen.