

Providence Presbyterian Church  
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Genesis 29 – Jacob and Laban

Jacob eyes Rachel moving towards the well, the sun is shining behind her, its rays illuminating her hair as it bounces with each step, sheep obscuring her feet as she floats along. It is the stuff of a romance novel set in an ancient time. Rachel, the younger daughter, who does not stay near the tent tending to the normal workload of women, but who is playing the role usually given or naturally allocated to sons. Rachel is the non-traditional daughter, the son of sorts. But she is beautiful and strong, elegant and rugged. And Jacob is taken by her.

It is the stuff of a romance novel set in an ancient time, but it is actually more about a God who is moving through hand-selected characters, rather than going rote-ly by tradition. It is about a God who is setting himself apart from other deities and expectations, who is working through and choosing the younger siblings rather than the old. There is something comforting in all this, but also something unnerving. Comforting in that it gives hope to the most ordinary or questionably qualified among us, those of us who are not first-born, or in line for opportunity, and yet wanting a calling, wanting to be a part of the story. In this way, it is indeed a good and hopeful narrative-line. But, if you like things traditional and predictable, and not prone to all this questioning and overturning, something you can just rely on from prior generations, then this is quite troubling.

But whether comforting or unnerving, God, from the very start, seemed content to do things differently, choosing not based on birth order or physical strength and prowess. And in these ancestral stories, one consistent theme is that in a culture where the firstborn and the oldest and, the biggest and the most productive get prime place, God often chooses otherwise. Jacob, the second-born, is no exception. But, it gets muddy. Jacob will be the one God chooses, but Jacob also helps God along with his scheming, achieving the status and birthright of the oldest by tricking his brother.

Nonetheless, it is Jacob who inherits the promises God made to Abraham. Last week, we read of Jacob's dream in the previous chapter, and of the stone that he stands up as a memorial, as a testament that God has appeared to him in that place. In Jacob's dream, heaven and earth are connected with angels going up and down, and God promises blessing on Jacob's descendants, and that his descendants will fill the land on which he is standing in all directions.

This encounter with God happens as Jacob is on his way to get a wife. He is on his way back to Haran, where his ancestors came from. Backing up to chapter 27, we hear several times throughout these chapters of the importance that Jacob return to Haran to find a wife. Rebekah laments at the possibility of Jacob marrying a local girl. Isaac charges Jacob saying, “You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women.” We might wonder if there is some prejudice against the locals, such as having entirely too few teeth, or eating their cereal without milk, or some other objectionable practice. However, Isaac and Rebekah make clear that this charge is more about tradition and their conventional expectations in these matters than it is looking down their nose at the locals. Jacob is to go to his uncle Laban and find a wife amidst Laban’s household. Isaac also said, “take as wife from there one of the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother.”

What does that make Rachel to Jacob? If my calculations are correct, they are first cousins. And no, this is not Appalachia. In many traditional cultures, the ideal spouse, particularly for the firstborn of a house, the position Jacob has assumed through scheming, is the first cousin. It’s probably not what James Dobson thinks of as a proper biblical marriage, but there you have it. Isaac and Rebekah are concerned that Jacob adds to their honor, especially seeing that Esau has already sold his birthright and married into a Hittite house, making his parents gray-haired and grumpy. So, they are intent that Jacob marries correctly, properly.

So, Jacob goes looking for Laban, and he comes across Laban’s men and flocks earlier in chapter 29. And there, with the men and the flocks, is Rachel. It seems Jacob falls quickly for Rachel. He kisses her and weeps. He finds her pleasing and beautiful. And so, he makes an arrangement with Laban. There would typically be some type of bride price or dowry expected. Since he comes empty-handed, it seems they work out a deal that he will work for Laban for seven years shepherding to win Rachel’s hand in marriage. Jacob, smitten with Rachel, seems glad to commit to such a long engagement.

The problem is that even though Jacob has gone to the house of his mother’s brother and has sought a wife from among his first cousins, Rachel is not the oldest. He went to all this trouble for a traditional marriage only to pick the wrong girl. For, to do this whole tradition thing correctly, Jacob, who is now the keeper of the birthright, is supposed to marry the firstborn of Laban’s daughters. Jacob seems to want the benefits of tradition without the constrictions of tradition. But, you don’t just skip over the firstborn if she is still unmarried. This is a fact that Jacob and Rachel have overlooked and perhaps dismissed. Laban has not. When Jacob protests Laban’s deception on his wedding night, Laban replies, “This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn.”

Another custom in traditional cultures and the Old Testament world is that you often don't confront matters directly. You don't want to shame one publicly or cause injury to the relationship or diminish one's honor. So, things are often accomplished a little manipulatively, indirectly, slyly. Add to this the fact that Jacob might have inherited his conniving attributes from his mother's side. When it is time for Jacob to receive Rachel as his wife, Laban rights the wrong in his own way by giving Jacob the wife he ought to take, not the younger that he had fallen in love with.

Now if we were in Jacob's shoes, we might ask a question that we are prone to ask. "God, why did you allow this to happen?" Things seem to be proceeding in an orderly fashion. Jacob could see how God's plans were proceeding, how God's promise was progressing, and his joy was growing as well, nearing his anticipated wedding date. But when Laban gives Jacob Leah in place of Rachel, it all starts to get wonky.

Leah, the firstborn, becomes Jacob's wife, though Jacob's heart is elsewhere and will spend the first seven years of their marriage earning the wife he originally wanted. Awk...ward! Verse thirty-one says that Leah was unloved. So, God gives her children, to increase her honor, even while the beloved Rachel is barren. So, Rachel gets Jacob's love. But she also wears the dishonor and shame of being unable to have children and the jealousy toward while her sister who bears Jacob children. It is the stuff soap-operas are made of.

I think of Langston Hughes poem, "what happens to a dream deferred?" Does it dry up, or does it fester, or does it build up to a point of snapping or exploding? That second spell of seven years had to be trying. The work that used to seem light in anticipation of the life Jacob desired, of the sense of God's purposes and promises, now must seem heavy and burdensome.

In this tussle between the way things are supposed to happen, and how God seems to choose for things to be done, and the human conniving of trying to make things go one's way, it gets REALLY messy. So messy, that it takes a trained eye to know if God is involved at all, or if it is all just human shortcomings "going out to play through the broken dike," to use William Stafford's expression.

Have you had seasons of life where such was true, that it might take a trained eye to know if God is involved at all. Where you might find yourself asking, why? Why, God, did things have to go this way? And, what do you do in the midst of such undesirable or muddy circumstances? There is no easy sorting it out and

correcting matters. There are too many dynamics going on all at once. And maybe you are operating out of calling, principle, conviction, or love, and still the sinful trajectories of humanity keep splashing over everything. Jacob's dream of descendants filling that promised land has turned into a network of stress and hurt, shame and jealousy.

What happens to a dream deferred? Do you give up, grow hopeless, grow cynical? We might grow hopeless or cynical over circumstances in our own lives. We might grow cynical over the work of the church, this business of praying for God's kingdom to come on earth and the world just seems to go on in its usual patterns of dysfunction. Or we might be hopeful but about the church at large, but overwhelmed by the possibility of our small church. But in our Romans' reading, we hear some good news.

For when we get to the point where we can't see the way, where we are not sure what to do, the "Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." The Spirit feels it too, interceding with sighs, sighs too deep for words. God is with us in this complicated world, the spirit giving voice to what we struggle to name, the spirit working in the places where we are prone to give up. "And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

God's plans are still in play. God's purposes are still at work.

Then - even more good news for folks like Jacob, folks like you and me. For when we find ourselves caught in those moments when it all feels too complicated or discouraging and disheartening, Paul asserts this: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."

Now, I'm not usually the biggest fan of this verse. I don't always like to spiritualize the junk of this world, nor be thankful for the difficulties in my own journey. And yet, I realize that if we don't accept and embrace the possibility, we grow angry and cynical, dejected and self-pitying. But if we see that challenges that affront us as bearing some possibility, some needed growth or lesson, or opportunity to deepen and grow, then we might press into these things, to discover what good God might do through it all.

I was listening to a book by Parker Palmer this week and he cited an expression from the program Outward Bound. The expression was: "If you can't get out of it, get into it." If you can't remove the problems or the predicaments, but move

towards rather than away, press into rather than complain. Because there is something there for you.

Now, I'll remind you that this was not my idea, it is not how I would choose to do things. But I am not God. And I am thankful that God chooses to use us in his purposes. I am thankful that he incorporates us into his family and his plans. And by incorporating humans, things do get messy. But let us not be discouraged, or pull away, or move towards self-pity. But rather let us take comfort in these truths and press into what we can't get out of:

[the] Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. <sup>27</sup> And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

<sup>28</sup> We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?

<sup>32</sup> He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? <sup>33</sup>

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

<sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> 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.

**29** Then Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the people of the east.  
<sup>2</sup> As he looked, he saw a well in the field and three flocks of sheep lying there beside it; for out of that well the flocks were watered. The stone on the well's mouth was large,<sup>3</sup> and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well, and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place on the mouth of the well.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob said to them, "My brothers, where do you come from?" They said, "We are from Haran."<sup>5</sup> He said to them, "Do you know Laban son of Nahor?" They said, "We do."<sup>6</sup> He said to them, "Is it well with him?" "Yes," they replied, "and here is his daughter Rachel, coming with the sheep."<sup>7</sup> He said, "Look, it is still broad daylight; it is not time for the animals to be gathered together. Water the sheep, and go, pasture them."<sup>8</sup> But they said, "We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together, and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep."

<sup>9</sup> While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep; for she kept them.<sup>10</sup> Now when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his mother's brother Laban, and the sheep of his mother's brother Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of his mother's brother Laban.<sup>11</sup> Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and wept aloud.<sup>12</sup> And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, and that he was Rebekah's son; and she ran and told her father.

<sup>13</sup> When Laban heard the news about his sister's son Jacob, he ran to meet him; he embraced him and kissed him, and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all these things,<sup>14</sup> and Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" And he stayed with him a month.

### *Jacob Marries Laban's Daughters*

<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.<sup>29</sup> (Laban gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her maid.)<sup>30</sup> So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for another seven years.

<sup>31</sup> When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren.<sup>32</sup> Leah conceived and bore a son, and she named him Reuben; for she said, “Because the LORD has looked on my affliction; surely now my husband will love me.”<sup>33</sup> She conceived again and bore a son, and said, “Because the LORD has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also”; and she named him Simeon.<sup>34</sup> Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, “Now this time my husband will be joined to me, because I have borne him three sons”; therefore he was named Levi.<sup>35</sup> She conceived again and bore a son, and said, “This time I will praise the LORD”; therefore she named him Judah; then she ceased bearing.

<sup>26</sup> Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. <sup>27</sup> And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

<sup>28</sup> We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. <sup>30</sup> And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

### *God's Love in Christ Jesus*

<sup>31</sup> What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? <sup>33</sup> Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. <sup>35</sup> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;  
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

<sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> 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.