

Taking His Time
Genesis 29 and 30, selected verses
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
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Growing up – I was taught that the Bible was full of role models. Given a biblical name. Heroes. I thought I was supposed to be like these people. If our reading in Genesis hasn't disabused you of this notion yet, then pay attention to the scriptures we have in Genesis 29 and 30. There's nobody here who is acting the way that you want your children to act.

Jacob, running away to avoid becoming victim of fratricide; penniless, homeless, full of fear, fresh off a dream in which he encountered the living God for the first time in his life...comes into the territory of Haran. He needs a job. He needs a home. He needs a wife. He's waiting for God to bring the promises to pass: God has promised him a homeland, many descendants, and that his family would be a blessing to the entire world.

He meets up with some of the locals, who happen to be in the employ of his uncle Laban. After a month, Jacob has fallen in love with the younger, more beautiful sister, Rachel. Jacob and Laban strike a deal:

Genesis 29:15 Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" **16** Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. **17** Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. **18** Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." **19** Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." **20** So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. **21** Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed."

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But this time, Jacob, the one who we have known to be a cunning and deceitful trickster is himself tricked. Laban pulls the old switcheroo on the wedding night and Jacob winds up marrying Leah, the older, unloved, unlovely sister instead of Rachel, the younger, beautiful, beloved sister. If you've been paying attention in Genesis, you'll notice that this is a little reversal in Jacob's life: after all, he's the younger, favored child...and he has passed over his older brother; now the shoe is on the other foot as the older sister receives the blessing intended for the younger one.

It's a momentary setback, however, and like a couple of horse-traders, Jacob and Laban are back at the bargaining table, treating these women as if they were nothing but property.

Genesis 29:25 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?" **26** Laban said,

“This is not done in our country —giving the younger before the firstborn. 27 Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.” 28 Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife...30So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for another seven years.

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All right, Pastor Dave, we get it. Laban’s no role model. That’s right, he’s not. But now skim through chapters 29 and 30 and look at how these sisters are operating. Almost immediately, they begin to have play a sort of a game where each is trying to get the advantage on the other. Leah, the first wife who is not loved as much as the second wife, starts having children – and she wastes no time letting her sister know that she’s getting on with the business of providing the heirs to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, while Rachel appears to be useless in this department. And just to make sure that Rachel and everyone else gets it, she gives the kids names: Reuben, which means, “see, a son!”; Simeon, which can mean, “God hears ME”; Levi, which means “attached”, as in “Jacob and I are attached”; and Judah – “praise the Lord”. If you’re keeping score at home – as Leah and Rachel surely were, that’s four to nil. And every night at dinner, don’t think that Leah didn’t have whale of a time calling out, “See, a son!”, “God hears me!”, “I am attached,” and “Praise the Lord!” and then looking over at her sister with a mixture of disdain and envy.

Rachel’s response, while predictable, is less than admirable. Just as she has been used as a bargaining chip between two men, she now takes her slave woman and brings her into the mix: she makes her servant Bilhah sleep with Jacob and become a surrogate mother to her son, Dan. In Hebrew, “Dan” means, “vndicated”. In sister-ese, “Dan” means “HAH!” But she’s not done yet. She sends Bilhah back in and this time Naphtali is born. Naphtali means “my struggle”, and Rachel actually says, “I have struggled with my sister and I have won!”

Not to be outdone, Leah gets into the surrogate mothering business and forces her slave, Zilpah, to sleep with Jacob and we wind up with Gad and Asher. Not long after that, Leah herself becomes pregnant again and gives birth to Issachar and, later on, Zebulun and eventually a daughter, Dinah. The birthing saga of these chapters ends in verse 23, wherein we learn that the beloved Rachel has finally had her own child, a son named Joseph.

Throughout these verses we see not only the conflict and arguing that I have named, but years and years of envy and rivalry; sisters who play their children against one another; people who supposedly trust God but go out and dig up so-called “magical” herbs, who disrespect each other and can’t believe the promise of God; people who live in pain and feel very, very free to share that pain with anyone who gets close enough to rub off on them.

What a sordid, messy, tale! These people, supposedly the “good guys” in Genesis, are shown for what they are: sinful, insecure, manipulative people who don’t miss a single chance to get over on each other. Laban, Jacob, Leah,

Rachel...are they role models? Are they here in scripture to show us how God wants us to act?

I hope not! Then why are they here? Do we look at these scheming and tainted people and say, "I can't believe that God would be interested in using losers like this to build his kingdom..."? Or can you join me and say, "Wow, if God can use a pathetic bunch like this, then maybe there's hope for someone like me, with kids like mine..."

Let me suggest at least two reasons why these chapters have been recorded for us – why we have the preserved for us in Scripture:

John 1:14 The Word became flesh and lived among us.

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Ever since the promise was given to Abraham, it's been a thin promise. I mean, we're promised a nation, we're promised descendants as numerous as the stars or as the grains of sand...and what does Abraham get? Twenty-five years of grief, of wondering, and finally a son – one that he just about kills before the kid starts Jr. High.

And then that kid, Isaac, gets out on his own, ready to start living the dream...and he's ready to own the promise, to count out the grains of sand, and by the time he's done, he's got one son, the smart one, who has run away from home and left the country while his other son has gone off and disregarded the call of God.

But finally, in the midst of this steamy soap opera, the promise of God that has defined this family for more than a hundred years begins to take shape. When Jacob has not one, not two, but twelve children...then we start to think that we have something to work with here. Do you see what's happening in these chapters? These are key transitional chapters in the book of Genesis. The promise of God – the Word of God – has been veiled and thin and stretched for a couple of generations. But in chapters 29 and 30, we see it opening up. As messed up as Jacob's family is (and if you're not sure of that yet, wait until we get a few chapters further along), the fact that they can't all fit into one booth at the local White Castle hamburger shop is good news.

I saw something about the promises of God becoming tangible this week when I was with your children on the mission trip. I saw a staff worker in an outreach center in a public housing development in Kentucky look at some of your children this week and say, "really? You came all the way from Pittsburgh just to help out? Here?" I saw someone stand up in front of a room full of her peers and say, "I know I'm not the person I want to be, or that God wants me to be, or that you wish that I was...but I'm going to keep trying to learn how to be that person."

"The word became flesh and dwelt among us". We usually think of that as a phrase that has to do with Jesus being born on earth. It does. But it also means that there are places and times where the mysterious, unbelievable,

wonderful promises of God actually do come true. Sometimes that looks like a stable in Bethlehem. Sometimes that looks like a patch of scrub land in the middle east. Sometimes that looks like a YMCA in the Berrytown neighborhood of Louisville. This week, it needs to look like a kitchen table on Oakmont St. or an office in town or a hospital room in the East End. Like it or not, you are the promise of God. You are flesh. You are called to share the grace of God with those around you. And some of you are ready to do that. Great! Go out there and do it.

But some of you are still not sure how you fit in. You're not sure how you can be a promise that is enfleshed.

Do you remember a few weeks ago when I was talking about the ways in which the stories in Genesis became important to the people of God? The story of Jacob and his son, Joseph, were of particular importance to their descendants who lived hundreds of years later – the Jews who were taken into exile for their own lack of faith and disobedience. God used this time of punishment to help them encounter huge questions...and to learn great things about his promise and his presence. But there are some key verses in this story that made sense to those who found themselves in a strange land, wondering whether God's promises were true:

Genesis 30:17 God listened to Leah...

Genesis 30:22 Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her...

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Can you see how that part of the story might be the absolute favorite line for someone who was tired of living in a strange place and eating strange food day after day? Can you see how a group of people might be camping out in a foreign country, crying out for God's presence, asking God to bring them home, asking God to hear them, and they get to this point of the story and they finally hear that among all the other things that God does, God listens and God remembers... Isn't that good news?

Beloved, this is the truth for you, too. In your brokenness. In your sinfulness. In all the places of your life that are not the way that you want them to be or know that they should and could be, you are not alone. When things in your marriage are not what you wish they were, you are not desolate. When your children seem to be walking away from God's best for their lives and you wonder how they will ever find a way home, you can get through it. When you ache with the uncertainty of your own health, know that the promises of God are for you. If Jacob and his family teach us anything, it's that God specializes in messy situations. Bring them to God, and wait on God, expecting God to use you.

Genesis 30 – God's story for Jacob, for Leah, for Rachel...and for you: God listens. God remembers.

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Amen.