

## ***“Wrestling With God—Jacob and His Two Wives”***

Last week Pastor Ben did a great job of kicking off a new series called Wrestling with God. We're looking at the life of one of our key spiritual ancestors, Jacob. Jacob lived about 4,000 years ago. His story was told and retold and retold. About 3,500 years ago it was written down. His story, like that of so many people in the Bible, is filled with things that made people laugh, and cry, and wonder, and look at their lives, and learn about God.

The Book of Genesis is 50 chapters long. Twenty-five of those chapters have to do with Jacob. Jacob was the father of the nation of Israel. His story was preserved to help us understand who we are, who God is, and what God expects of our lives.

Last week we looked at how Jacob was born a twin. He was the younger of the twins by just a few minutes. His older brother was Esau. When Esau was born he came out covered in hair so they named him Esau which means “hairy”. When Jacob came out he was holding on to his brother heel. The name Jacob means heel-puller, or leg-puller, which means to be a trickster or deceiver. And Jacob lived into his name. We heard how he took advantage of his older brother and got his brother's future share of their inheritance in exchange for a bowl of stew.

Later Jacob tricked his father and stole his brothers blessing. When Esau discovered that Jacob had stolen his blessing, he swore to kill Jacob. So Jacob was sent away by his mother to the old country for his safety. His mother told him, “I'll send for you when it's safe to come back.” But in her lifetime it was never safe for him to come back. Jacob makes his trek to the old country, central Syria, all by himself. He's afraid, and he's discouraged. One night he goes to sleep under the stars and as he's sleeping he has a dream where he sees God himself and God speaks to him and says, “Jacob you are mine, and I am yours, and your descendents will inherit this land and I will bless you and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed through you.”

Jacob woke up and his life was changed. Seeing and encountering God in that dream, he believed in God for the first time. He came to know God and to know that life wasn't all about him. He had a conversion experience and for him that meant that he wanted to live into what God had called him to do, to be a blessing to others. That's where Ben left off last week.

Today we seek Jacob arriving at the old country where his relatives are from. He's going there for his safety, but he's also going there to start a family. And he falls in love. If you want to follow along turn in your Bibles to Genesis chapter 29, verse 9. And let me set this up for you. Jacob has had his dream and he's determined to live differently than he's lived before. After traveling, possibly months, a journey of about 400 miles, he arrives in the old country which is named Pad-dan-aram.

He's there looking for his uncle, Laban. One of the first places he finds people is at a well. This was a common, shared well. It was sealed by a huge, heavy stone. They had a system where 4 or 5 flocks of sheep would gather and the shepherds together would move the stone. Then they would water their sheep, and then together they would move this huge stone back over the well to protect it.

Joseph walks up to these shepherds and asks them if they know his uncle Laban. They say, “Yes we do, in fact his daughter is just over there arriving with her flock of sheep.” At hearing this and at seeing her, Jacob is moved to tears. Tears of joy for finding his family, and finding safety, and meeting one of his far-off family members. He's also moved because this daughter of Laban, her name is Rachel, arrives and she is beautiful. And Jacob is so excited that he goes over and single-handedly moves the stone from the well! Now he paid for that with the chiropractor for several weeks afterwards. Rachel then takes Jacob with her and runs and tells her father that this long lost relative has arrived. Jacob has a homecoming. And we see that there is a spark of true love the moment he sees Rachel.

Now Jacob works for Laban for a month and while he's there with that family, he's falling deeper and deeper in love with Rachel. And so after that month, Laban says to Jacob, “It's not right for you to work for me for nothing. What would you like from me in return for your labor?” Here's what the Bible says, **“Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, ‘I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel’” (Genesis 29:16-18).** We're getting a glimpse here that Jacob is moving away from being so self-absorbed and just living for himself, to giving himself away. He's telling Laban, “This is how much I love your daughter. I love her so much I'll work for you for 7 years in order to have her hand in marriage.”

Now it's important to know a little bit about Laban's oldest daughter, Leah. The Bible says that her eyes were weak. Some translations say that her eyes were beautiful. The word in Hebrew actually means that her eyes were soft. And that could be a way of saying, "Her eyes were pretty, but the rest of her wasn't so hot." More likely it means that she had a sight impairment, or possibly was cross-eyed, there was something wrong with her eyes that had kept her from getting married sooner.

Now I want you to notice how far Jacob has fallen in love with this younger sister, **So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her" (Genesis 29:20)**. Isn't that beautiful? Seven years seemed like just a few days because he loves her so very much. Another thing that's interesting if you read further is that you'll see that Jacob and Leah waited to have sex until they were married. Seven years they waited. Jacob was, in essence the 40 year old virgin. That was a way to demonstrate both their depth of commitment to God and their love for one another. He was 47 when they would finally be married.

That leads us to the next scene which is **the wedding surprise**. This is in Genesis 29. **"So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her. Then Jacob said to Laban, 'Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to make love to her.' So Laban brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast" Genesis 29:20-22**. Let's pause here for a moment. Jacob has worked 7 years, it's time for the wedding, they have a big wedding banquet, it's wonderful, it's a joyful time for everybody there. But Laban is about to pull a dirty trick on Jacob.

Back then a bride wore a veil that covered her face. A very heavy veil, not a veil like we have today that you could see through. So you couldn't see the bride's face, and the bride and groom didn't have contact during the ceremony. The priest did the ceremony, then there was dancing, and a big party, and lots of food and lots of wine. And then after all of that the man went into the tent to be with his wife, and in the darkness. consummated the marriage. So keep that in mind as the story unfolds.

**"But when evening came, Laban took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and Jacob made love to her...When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, 'What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?' Laban replied, 'It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. Finish this daughter's bridal week; then we will give you the younger one also, in return for another seven years of work.' And Jacob did so. He finished the week with Leah, and then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. Jacob made love to Rachel also, and his love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah. And he worked for Laban another seven years" (Genesis 29:23-30)**.

One interesting side note here. In our weddings today, which has been a tradition for thousands of years, when there is a veil, you lift the veil just before the ceremony begins, this is the reason why! Literally! This is where the tradition begins so you make sure you have the right one before you say your vows.

But, we've got to ask, how is it that Jacob was confused that night? Well, first of all there was the heavy veil, second there was a lot of wine flowing that night. So by the time Jacob made his way into the marriage tent, it's dark, there's this woman lying there waiting for him, she doesn't say a word, and they make love. And then he passes out.

Think about all this for a minute. Because in one way it was meant to be humorous, and in another way it's tragic and sad. I mean, where's Rachel in this story? Her father, Laban, has her under lock and key somewhere else. Maybe he's had to tie her up and gag her because her heart is about to be broken. I mean, this is the man that she loved. That she waited to give herself to for 7 years. And instead her sister is given to him.

And then Leah. What's she thinking during all of this? As she's there with the veil over her face, are there tears streaming down her face during the wedding ceremony because her father is making her do this? But this isn't what she wants to do. She always wanted a man to love her for her, not to be tricked into marrying her. While she lay there in the darkness and her husband makes love to her, is she holding back the tears, or maybe biting her tongue in the midst of this thinking to herself, "This isn't how I imagined it would be. I want him to want me."

What do you think she's praying that whole night while she's waiting for morning when he wakes up? "Lord, please make him love me. Please make him want to be with me and not Rachel." But when morning comes, that's not what happens. It's a funny story at first, but under the surface it's tragic. Life hasn't worked out the way Rachel, or Leah, or Jacob had wanted it.

Well, as we think of Leah, that leads us to the next scene in this story, **The desperate need to be loved**. Jacob's stories were a tragic comedy, and today we might think of them in terms of television series like *Desperate Housewives*. We have Leah who is desperate to be loved. We can all relate to that, because every single one of us in this room longs to be loved. We want to be the apple of somebody's eye. We want someone to look at us, treasure us and see us as important and really want to be with us.

Leah was looking to be loved, the problem was that she was longing to be loved by a man who could only give her so much because he'd been tricked into marrying her. He loved Rachel.

So Leah goes about the process of trying to win his love. Listen to how this worked in 29:31-34. **“When the LORD saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless. Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, ‘It is because the LORD has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now.’ She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, ‘Because the LORD heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too.’ So she named him Simeon. Again she conceived, and when she gave birth to a son she said, ‘Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.’ So he was named Levi” (Genesis, 29:31-34).**

So do you think that now Jacob was in love with Leah after these three sons were born? No. She could have had 20 sons and it wouldn't have changed anything. He would take care of her and provide for her, but he didn't love her.

But here's something that Leah missed. Go back and look at verse 31 again. “When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive.” Each of these children was a gift from God to Leah. Sometimes we look at the Old Testament and we think God is really harsh, and uncaring. But you just have to read more carefully. I mean God looks at a woman who is unloved, who has weak eyes, and you know what he was saying when he allowed her to give birth? He was saying, “Leah, I love you. I think you're perfect just the way you are. I think you're beautiful. I love you more than you can imagine or believe.”

You know the power of love is pretty astounding. When you know that you're loved, and you feel it, you live in a different way than when you're constantly trying to see if you can win someone else's affection. The overarching message of the Bible is this: Even if no one else loves you, God already loves you!

When you live your life in the love of God, knowing that God loves you already, you wake up every day and feel that love in your life, you live differently because you live, not at a deficit, but you have something to give away. You're not constantly, desperately trying to get something because you already have it, which makes it possible to give it away.

That leads to the next scene, **Infertility**. Leah is feeling unloved but having children; Rachel feels loved by her husband but can't have children. She's wrestling with infertility. And as she and Jacob wrestle with infertility together it starts to put a strain on their marriage. Rachel's jealousy of Leah just magnifies this.

And in the midst of that, we find a marital fight recorded in scripture. Let's take a look at it. This is in Genesis 30:1-2. **“When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister. So she said to Jacob, ‘Give me children, or I'll die!’ Jacob became angry with her and said, ‘Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?’” (Genesis 30:1-2).** Can you hear the pain in Rachel's voice? I've heard that pain the voice of people struggling with infertility. There's a deep pain.

I've got to say this about the issue of infertility. Sometimes well-meaning Christians who love God, and love you add to that pain. They'll say things like, “You know it must be the will of God that you're not having children.” 4,000 years ago people may have said that, but today, we actually understand some of the causes of infertility. When you say something like that to somebody, it feels like a dagger being driven into their heart. I mean if you have cancer, did God give you cancer? If we actually believe that then we don't go get cancer treatment, we don't need healthcare, because whatever disease we get is what God wanted us to have and trying to heal that is fighting against God. But we don't think that way! Why would we think that way when it comes to infertility?

So in the face of infertility we pray, we entrust it to God, we pray that God will use doctors, and medicines, and technologies, and God will use his direct touch in our lives and we trust God no matter what happens. Somehow God will use whatever happens in our lives for his purposes.

Let's all be careful about how we talk about infertility. In this story we see them saying that it was God's will, but we also see them doing everything in their power to remedy it. Rachel uses mandrake roots, a medicinal plant used to treat infertility.

In fact one of the remedies for infertility in the time and culture was for a woman to offer her handmaid to her husband. He would sleep with his wife's handmaid who would become pregnant and the handmaid would actually

give birth sitting on the wife's lap. When the baby is born it is then given to the wife and adopted as her very own. Rachel does this twice. Leah does this three times with her handmaid. Then amazingly, after all this we're told that God blesses Rachel and she gives birth to a son herself—Joseph is his name. All totaled the two women and their handmaids had 12 children.

What does all this tell us? First, this was a really mixed up family! Poor Jacob comes home every night wondering, "Who am I sleeping with tonight?" You have four moms and one dad. You talk about family systems that are messed up, or complicated, or dysfunctional. This was a dysfunctional family, but guess what...God did amazing things through them. These children become the 12 tribes of Israel. Your family maybe sort of dysfunctional, but God can even use your family, somehow by his grace and mercy. He even works through families that are dysfunctional.

But part of what this tells us, with Jacob and Rachel, they loved each other deeply, but the story didn't unfold the way they wanted it. And it hardly ever does. No marriage is perfect. These two loved each other deeply, but they had their problems. They had their challenges. They had their heartache and their heartbreak. And that's how it is with all of us. In every marriage that couple is going to have some pain in their lives. And there's going to be heartache and moments the hate each other. Moments they fight and lots of moments in between when they love one another. And that's life even for these two key spiritual ancestors of ours, Jacob and Rachel.

That leads us to the end of Rachel's life. There comes a point when Jacob takes his entire family back to the land he fled when his was 40. As they make the journey back his wife Rachel conceives one last time. She's in her late 40's now and this is a complete surprise. There's excitement and joy around her pregnancy. Jacob is around 70 now. This Genesis 35:16-20. **"Then they moved on from Bethel. While they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and had great difficulty. And as she was having great difficulty in childbirth, the midwife said to her, 'Don't despair, for you have another son' As she breathed her last—for she was dying—she named her son Ben-Oni [which means son of my trouble]. But his father named him Benjamin [which means son of my right hand]. So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). Over her tomb Jacob set up a pillar, and to this day that pillar marks Rachel's tomb" (Genesis 35:16-20).** Jacob names the boy, "Son of my right hand." Who was his right hand? Rachel was his right hand. He loved her. She died in childbirth. In part, this is a story of the tragedy that happens in life. It happens to people that God loves dearly. It happens to all of us.

Rachel died and Jacob built a pillar to mark her grave. And this says that that pillar is still standing. Remember, this was written down around 450 years after the time Jacob lived. In the book of 1 Samuel we read that that pillar is still standing 700 years after the time of Jacob and Rachel. What does that tell you about the depth of his love for his wife? He loved her dearly and tragedy happened, and this is life.

Jacob lived another 70 years and just before he died he's having a conversation with his son Joseph. Do you know what he's talking about? The sorrow he's carried with him for 70 years at the loss of Rachel. Jacob and Rachel's story is a story about love. It's a beautiful love story about what might be for all of us. A picture of two people who care for one another and love one another until the very end, in spite of the problems and challenges in life.

And one final word about Leah. She wanted to be loved by a husband who never loved her the way she hoped. But what she didn't understand is that she was already loved by God. We could imagine that day when Leah's life is over and she enters the kingdom of heaven. Picture God taking Leah's face in his hands and saying, "Leah, didn't you understand? I loved you every moment of every day. And Leah, I want you to know I've always thought your eyes were beautiful. That you are beautiful."

We need to understand that life is sometimes hard. That dysfunction happens in every family and God loves you. God loves you. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*I thank Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, for his resources in this message.*