

*Jacob -2*

**Gen 30:1-6 CEB** When Rachel realized that she could bear Jacob no children, Rachel became jealous of her sister and said to Jacob, "Give me children! If you don't, I may as well be dead." <sup>2</sup> Jacob was angry at Rachel and said, "Do you think I'm God? God alone has kept you from giving birth!" <sup>3</sup> She said, "Here's my servant Bilhah. Sleep with her, and she will give birth for me. Because of her, I will also have children." <sup>4</sup> So Rachel gave her servant Bilhah to Jacob as his wife, and he slept with her. <sup>5</sup> Bilhah became pregnant and gave birth to a son for Jacob. <sup>6</sup> Rachel said, "God has judged in my favor, heard my voice, and given me a son." So she named him Dan.

**Gen 30:29-32 CEB** Jacob said to him, "You know how I've worked for you, and how well your livestock have done with me. <sup>30</sup> While in my care, what little you had has multiplied a great deal. The LORD blessed you wherever I took your livestock. Now, when will I be able to work for my own household too?" <sup>31</sup> Laban said, "What will I pay you?" Jacob said, "Don't pay me anything. If you will do this for me, I will take care of your flock again, and keep a portion. <sup>32</sup> I will go through the entire flock today, taking out all of the speckled and spotted sheep, all of the black male lambs, and all of the spotted and speckled female goats. That will be my price.

*Jacob -2*

Last week we looked at some of the major events in Genesis, chapters 25-29. With cunning Jacob tricked his father into giving him the blessing that belonged to Esau. With cunning, Jacob's Uncle Laban tricked Jacob into marrying a woman that he didn't want to marry. If it had occurred to me at the time, I would have remarked that Shakespeare warned us, "What tangled webs we weave, when first we practice to deceive." With apology in advance to Shakespeare, today's scripture illustrates "O what tangled webs we weave, when oft we plot to conceive!" Let's pick up the story of Jacob where we left off last week.

Jacob worked seven years for his Uncle Laban to earn the right to marry beautiful Rachel. But Laban substituted the older daughter Leah in the dark of the wedding night. In the morning light, Jacob realized he'd been tricked. In a heated exchange, Uncle Laban agreed that if Jacob would complete a honeymoon week with Leah and promise to work another seven years, then he could marry Rachel in a week.

Now, isn't this a fine mess? Laban has gotten both daughters off his hands and got fourteen years of servitude out of Jacob. Meanwhile, Jacob got a wife he wanted and one he didn't want, and Leah was fully aware that she's a wife only because of her father's cheating and conniving. Jacob didn't love Leah, but he didn't avoid her completely. Leah had a son, and she named him Rueben. The name meant "behold, a son." She said, "Now my husband will love me."

But that didn't happen. She had a second son, named Simeon, and said that it was because she was still unloved. She had a third son and named him Levi, which means "joined" saying "Now my husband will love me because I've given him three sons." She had a fourth son. Perhaps she had given up on getting Jacob to love her. She named the fourth son Judah, which means "praise" and said "This time I will praise the Lord." Then she stopped bearing children. Perhaps she just failed to become pregnant – or perhaps she shut the door to her tent.

Meanwhile, foxy Rachel had failed to become pregnant. She was jealous of her sister and told Jacob, "Give me children! If you don't, I might as well be dead!" She blamed Jacob, but he wasn't having any part of it. He blamed the lack of pregnancies on God! People haven't changed much. When pregnancies are wanted but don't come about, we're quick to blame the other spouse – or God! Rachel reached for the same solution that Jacob's grandmother, Sarah, had tried. She provided a surrogate mother. Just as Sarah had given her servant Hagar to Abraham, Rachel gave her servant Bilhah to Jacob. Just as Rachel and Leah had been treated like property by their father,

Rachel, in turn treated her servant Bilhah in the same way. "I'm marrying you to my husband. Go sleep with him." We have no clue how Bilhah felt about getting thrown into this caldron of fertility and jealousy.

Bilhah had a son, but Rachel got to name the baby. His name was Dan, which means "judge" and Rachel said, "God has judged in my favor." Then Bilhah had another son and Rachel named him Naphtali, which means something on the order of "my wrestling", and Rachel said, "I've competed with my sister and won."

Not to be outdone, Leah gave her servant Zilpah to Jacob as a wife. Zilpah had a son and Leah named him Gad which means fortunate and she said, "What good luck I've had." Zilpah had another son. Leah named his Asher which means "happy" because, she said, "I'm happy because women will call me happy."

Leah wanted to be loved and Rachel wanted to have children and so they competed over Jacob. And then it got worse.

At harvest time, Leah's son Reuben found some herbs that were thought to have aphrodisiac and fertility properties. Rachel wanted them. Leah responded, "Isn't it enough that you've taken my husband? Now you want there erotic herbs, too?" Rachel replied, "Give me the herbs and you can sleep with Jacob tonight." How did Rachel get this power? Who or what gave her the authority to fill out Jacob's dance card? Apparently that was the way things were, because when Jacob came in from the fields that evening, Leah told him, "I paid for you for tonight." We aren't told how Jacob felt about all of this. Did it feed his ego, or did he feel like a stud in service to other peoples' agendas? We have no way of knowing, but there was undoubtedly tension and complexity in the web of relationships that the two sisters wove.

Leah became pregnant and had a fifth son. She named him Issachar which means "there is payment." She said, "God gave me what I paid for." She had a sixth son and named him Zebulun, meaning "honor." She said, "Now my husband will honor me because I've borne six sons for him." After that she had a daughter named Dinah.

At last, Rachel had a son. She named him Joseph, meaning "he increases." She felt that the shame of barrenness had been removed and silently prayed for the Lord to give her another son.

Whew! All of this scheming competition makes me tired! Sometimes we bemoan how difficult it is to keep family relationships straight in our heads because of divorce and re-marriage. There're his kids and her kids and their kids. Kids end up with several sets of grandparents, step-and half-siblings, and aunts, uncles and cousins that are hard to categorize. But truth be told, that's no more complex than family trees back in the days when a man might have two or more successive wives that died in childbirth. Nor is it more complex than Jacob's family of multiple wives and what could most tactfully be called "secondary" wives. How is one to sort out the pecking order in his family? Who gets the birthright and blessing? What about the servants Zilpah and Bilhah who weren't kinfolk like Leah and Rachel? How would Momma Rebekah feel about Jacob's union with foreigners? And do their children really count?

Now, after seven years of working for Laban to fulfill his promise to work a second seven years for Rachel, and after four wives producing eleven sons and a daughter, Jacob wanted to go back to his home in Canaan. Laban said, I've discovered by a divine sign that the Lord has blessed me because of you. I'd like for you to stick around, so name your price. Jacob knew that while he had acquired a family, he didn't own a thing. He needed to have flocks and herds as a means to support his family. He offered to take care of Laban's flocks, asking that he be given the spotted and speckled sheep and goats and the black sheep. These were a small portion of the herd. Apparently, those colorings were recessive genes. Laban agreed to the conditions, but that very day, Laban took all of the speckled, spotted and black animals and gave them to his sons and sent this variegated herd off to a place three days journey away, leaving Jacob to manage what appeared to be a pure, solid white herd. Jacob had no knowledge about dominant and recessive genes, so he tried to influence the

outcome of future breeding by erecting striped poles near the watering troughs where the animals mated. When speckled and striped animals were born, he kept them separate and they produced more offspring like themselves. After six years, Jacob owned huge flocks and had many servants. He had become a wealthy man despite Laban's attempt to fix the odds so that Jacob would never be able to afford to leave.

If your favorite soap opera has been cancelled, if the reality show has concluded, or if *Downton Abbey* episodes are few and far between, the stories of families in the old Hebrew scriptures might fill the gaps for you. Even if not, what lessons can we learn from Jacob's twenty year sojourn in Haran, living with his uncle's family? There are certainly some really good bad examples. Having multiple wives has a high probability of generating a lot of family tension. And if you blatantly prefer one wife over the others, you're asking for trouble. That lesson isn't just about wives: it covers family members in general. Favorite children or grandchildren can cause huge problems, as well.

Another lesson is that children are often an ineffective way for women to try to get love and strengthen their relationship with men. That says something disappointing about a lot of men. It also warns that using fertility as a manipulative tool may fail to produce the desired results. If he marries her because she's pregnant, it won't automatically result in a happy marriage. If they decide to have a baby to try to strengthen or save their marriage, they're likely to be tragically disappointed.

There's a positive lesson here, as well. Jacob develops the virtues of fairness and patience. He kept his agreements with his uncle and fulfilled his promises even when his uncle dealt unfairly with him. And if patience is a virtue, Jacob developed and exhibited a lot of patience over a twenty-year period of dealing with Laban.

Finally, this family saga continues to illustrate that our ancestors in the faith were confronted with the complexities of life just as we are, that they made some really bad decisions just as we do, and that God continued to love them steadfastly - and we live immersed in that same love. That is extraordinarily good news. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,

Learn the lessons of Esau and Jacob.

Don't sacrifice tomorrow's fulfillment on the altar of today's satisfaction.

Know that conniving and deception will turn and bite you.