

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Proper 12 Year A
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The voices of Leah, Rachel, and the two slave girls are silent in our unfolding birth narrative of the nation of Israel, yet these women remain major players in the unfolding of God's promises. Not a word is spoken, yet the story cannot progress without them.

Jacob too seems to be merely a pawn in a chess game of deceit and trickery, both in running from the stinging rage of Esau, whom he deceived for his birthright and blessing, and in the receiving of a similar stinging blow when his bride is switched on him, and Leah is led into the nuptial tent, rather than his beloved, Rachel, for whom he had worked for seven years in payment for his wife, her dowry.

One thing clear about Jacob is that his "aha" moment of spiritual awakening we learned of last week, when he declared, "Surely God is in this place and I just didn't know it", which manifested in the altar he built at Bethel, hadn't yet settled within his being, hadn't yet re-ordered his thinking, priorities or behavior, for nowhere during this traverse of the desert, or the scene at the well, or in the meeting his beloved or her family, does Jacob bring God into the situation. There is no prayer, there is no imploring God to send angels in advance to open the way for success, as Isaac's servant did when coming to this same well, to find a wife for Isaac, Jacob's mother Rebekah. There was no thanksgiving, there was no praise.

There was only a sign of power and authority, when Jacob pulled away the giant stone covering the well, to give Rachel's flock the fresh water to drink, ignoring the local custom of waiting for all the shepherds using the well to gather, so together they could roll away the stone, a practice which protected the watering rights of all. Jacob's inattentiveness to, lack of interest in, or disregard for how the local people order their common lives in his initial meeting gives us a clue that this oversight may come back to sting him, which of course it does, for another part of the local custom was for the eldest daughter was to be married first. He didn't even think to ask this question when he asked to marry Rachel.

Although Jacob found God at Bethel, we see from this section of the story, that one's spiritual life, even after an "aha" moment with God can become stalled, a lull time before transformation happens. This may be a time when seeds are taking root, nourished by an openness to the holy, or it may be desert time, when there is no nourishment available for the seeds, and they soon will wither and die. We don't know which scenario it might have been, but Jacob had perceived the presence of God and either thought that that fleeting moment of revelation of God was all there was, or that he was "done" in his quest or love of God, or that the revelation required no response, rather than understanding that after finding God, the hard work begins of obeying, relinquishing control, offering your whole self, and the re-ordering of your life's passion, work, thoughts, and behavior to something larger than yourself. This pattern

of seeking, finding, relinquishing, and offer your whole self is something that shows up in our story of the pearl of great value, and we pray happens to you each time you walk into this church, or journey to your sacred space where you regularly find God.

To bore down into the truth of this repeating pattern in the engagement of God, we may need to wade through our judgment of Jacob for his lack of response to God, or push aside our odd pleasure that someone, Jacob's father-in-law out-deceived the great deceiver, and we may also need to extract the truth from the historical context of the story, which offends our modern sensibilities regarding the rights of all humans. I often wonder if those who say our modern world should return to the family values in the Bible, if they are reading the same Bible I am. For in this sort piece of the story, we have women without voices, women being treated as property, human trafficking with the slave girls being offered to the wife's husband for pleasure and procreation, an objectification of both women and men (as the women decide whose tent Jacob would inhabit in the evening), and an acceptance of physical intimacy without love, and of course, the common practice of polygamy. Those practices hardly seem like the voice of the Gospel based on the understanding that we all are God's beloved. It takes a lot of work to crawl into these stories at enough depth to shed the offensive context, to resist dismissing it entirely, and to find a connection to who we are now and how we are called to live more faithfully.

I want to have that conversation with you in a discussion about Leah. Now the translation we read this morning says Leah has lovely eyes. That's not how it has been translated in the past. You may remember the description to be "weak" eyes. There is ambivalence in how to accurately translate this word, but most scholars believe it to be soft, or without passion, without the light of life shining through them. Her name is translated as "cow" and that was not meant to be a compliment. Because Leah is described and then the conjunction with the description of Rachel as lovely and graceful is "but", we know that she is inferior to Rachel in appearance. Leah, the eldest daughter, the one to be first married, perceived by her father as only marriageable through trickery, had gotten the message that she was not beautiful, and therefore would not be loved. Her predicament alerts us to the fact that there are still "Leahs" in our society. Young girls who are told they are ugly, who are told they will never marry, who are told they will never find love, who are told that the only way to make a man love you is through bearing his children, who are treated like property, who are kept silent and invisible.

In a commentary which played out a conversation between Leah and Rachel, Rachel, the beautiful one, says to Leah, the ugly one, "But Leah, you're really nice, much nicer than I am. You're always patient and kind, so thoughtful, so loving!" Leah replies, "When you're not pretty, you have to be kind and patient, and proper, and all the rest. You have nothing else to please a husband with."

This could all be interesting and important and a reminder to find these poor young girls in our midst and raise them up to think differently of themselves, and that would be a good and right thing to do. We can see this story as God's divine response to the oppression of women, assurance that God sees the affliction of the women, hears their cries, remembers them, and takes away their disgrace.

And, Leah is one who can be our own soul-mother, when we, male or female, ache with feelings of inadequacy or unworthiness, or of being passed over, or not good enough to be loved, or when we feel we need to settle for a relationship when there is betrayal or abuse. The redemption God worked in Leah's life, through her marriage to Jacob and her sons and daughter can be ours, for sometimes I believe feeling unloved, or un-loveable, of being rejected by others or ourselves, can be the biggest impediment to our spiritual development. These feelings can be at the root of loneliness and the inability to make sustained intimate connections, and can set up high level of incessant inner noise, which blocks out the sounds of silence, that comes to us with healing beauty. Leah's pain is real, imposed or learned from her family, and we can feel solace in her journey toward wholeness, for it is often one we travel as well.

We could stop right here and there would be plenty for us to unpack in Leah's journey, but there's one crucial detail here that I think informs our more complete reading of the story: Jesus traces his lineage back to Leah, the "unloved", not to the beautiful and beloved Rachel. This fact confirms the deep truth found in this birth narrative of the nation of Israel, that through this nation of God's people, the lowly will be raised up, by being the container which tenderly holds the holy. We know by the way this story is written that God cares about the oppressed and instructs us to do likewise. And then as Christians, we believe that through Jesus God provides within us the power and inspiration to overturn the systems which oppress all people. And this passion to change the world, to care for the rights of all humans, which is so deeply rooted in the divine will, is opened within us, when we experience transforming love.

The love Leah experienced on the evening of her wedding, when she and Jacob move from the public event of the procession from the bride's home, to the reading of the marriage contract, to the abundant feast, and then finally into the privacy of the nuptial tent, when she could give and receive love, even if in deceit made possible in the darkness, she was transformed at her spiritual core, she felt loved and lovely, and she got a glimpse of YHWH's love for her.

This is our experience too when we share love with God. The times of intimacy between two people and our times of intimacy with God contain the same elements: vulnerability, desire, discovery, surprise, curiosity, yearning, self-giving, fulfillment, a meeting of souls, the possibility of new life, and joy. The joy the merchant experienced when he found the pearl of great value, was such that he was willing to sell all that he had, for he knew his life would not be whole without it. Our discovery and hunger are met by a love beyond imagination, which releases within us an offering of ourselves at depth, and happens for us each time we find Jesus in our midst, each time we put Jesus at the center, each time we give it all away so our emptiness can be filled with holiness, each time we are transported into that thin place, each time we feel the loving and affirming presence of a God who loves us, our spiritual core is awakened. And once we have experienced this exchange of love with God or others, our lives are changed, our souls are transformed, and we can think of nothing other than having everyone experience the freedom that love offers. This is how beauty, joy, and the experience of holiness are connected to justice. We are deeply formed by our encounters of God which in turn unlocks a desire

within us for justice for all, where all voices are heard, where no one is oppressed, where all are respected.

Our journey with God can get stalled out like Jacob's, or we may feel like it never has really begun. Sometimes we wait for the huge "aha" moments and miss all the small whispers God places on our hearts. And for us, as Episcopalians, who value reason so much, who understand the equal weight we place on reason, tradition, and scripture, we can approach God almost too much through our heads and intellectual reasoning and think that is all there is to God—having a right belief. This is why it is important to also allow our hearts to fall in love with God, to release into the unknowing, to give ourselves completely to something we can't fully understand, and to be changed, so we can change the world. This often happens in moments of silence, when we finally listen, not talk all the time at God.

This spiritual core which is shaped by God's love is like the pearl of great value mentioned in our gospel. It is the most valuable part of our human experience, for it relates us to God and centers us correctly in the world. This experience of transformation is not found in the surface of life, in the tangle of physical and social interactions of daily life, it is hidden in the field, like the pearl of great value, hidden in our hearts, and it is found by going "into the tent" where we meet a love beyond imagination, with a God beyond our comprehension.

And when we do encounter the holy, we know finding God is not enough. Unlike Jacob, we must continue to lean into this initial moment of revelation, and let it happen again and again. For when we do, passion, pleasure, and purpose will be added to who we are and what we do. But there are costs to this all. This spiritual awakening is disruptive, exhilarating, and discomfoting. Just ask Susan, whom we send off to seminary today with our love and prayers. Her journey, or any faithful person's journey is not easy, but when we find that pearl of joy in our hearts from knowing that alive relationship with God, we know we are ready to sell it all, release our hold on all that we were, to be changed and to change the world. We find that being in the Kingdom of Heaven is an ongoing process of putting together the old and the new, of finding the holy, selling our worldly goods, burying our current lives, and reinventing ourselves in the light of the ongoing revelation of God. Jesus came to change us, to turn us toward himself, so we all can live like the God who is love. Let us put Christ at the center of our lives and of our parish. Amen.