

Tell Me A Story: About Sisters
Genesis 29.15-28
Pentecost +7
Sunday, July 27, 2014
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
Elizabeth Mangham Lott

Matthew 1 begins with 17 verses we typically skip before reading the birth narrative, or the Christmas story, of Mary and Joseph and angels of the Lord and the mysterious promises of God. The verses introducing that outrageous story begin:

This is the genealogy[a] of Jesus the Messiah[b] the son of David, the son of Abraham:

2 Abraham was the father of Isaac,
Isaac the father of Jacob,
Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,
3 Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar,

And the naming continues in that pattern until we are told, “Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.”

One purpose in the Matthew genealogy is to prove to readers that Jesus is linked to the work of God from the beginning of God’s covenant with God’s people. The gospel writer is picking up that narrative thread and tugging on it just enough to show the highlights of where the thread connects in 42 generations across the Hebrew Scriptures.

Today’s Genesis story is another “outrageous story about outrageous people doing outrageous things to each other. It has much in common with tall tales of folklore.”¹ When we read chapters 29 and 30 with an ear for folklore, we discover this is an elaborate genealogy.

Earlier this summer, my children discovered the show *Tinga Tinga Tales* on Netflix, and we have watched many episodes together. The American Disney networks picked up the show, broadcast originally in Kenya, telling etiology stories from Africa—legends of how things came to be. The brightly illustrated stories and accompanying music focus on animals: Why Ostrich Sticks Her Head in the Sand, Why Leopard Has Spots, Why Skunk Smells, Why Meerkat is Always on the Lookout. They are delightful, silly tales of

¹ Carolyn Brown, *Worshiping With Children*

how ordinary and unusual occurrences in nature may have originated. This happens in scripture, too.

From Genesis 29:1-35:18 we have the drawn out genealogy of Jacob. Jacob, through Rachel and Leah and Zilpah and Bilhah, fathers Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Dinah, Joseph, and Benjamin. On *Tinga Tinga Tales* the episode title might be “How the trickster became the tricked” or the less catchy “How the tribes of Israel were born of conflict.” These chapters of Genesis are laying out the bloodline of Jacob, but also continuing to weave the story we have seen for weeks: humans plot and scheme, fight for their own way, manipulate circumstances around them, but God continues to work for good in the cracks and corners of the story. God continues to make a people, find a way, hear the cries, and bless the broken.

Last week we looked at Jacob-the-runaway after he tricked his brother and father then ran for his life. Now we have before us Jacob-the-suitor. Just as we discovered his mother, Rebekah, at the well several weeks ago, we now meet the lovely Rachel. Like Rebekah before her, Rachel is lovely and smart and paying attention. And Rachel wants to manipulate her birth order to Leah just as much as Jacob wanted to trump Esau.

It is both discouraging and comforting to see the patterns of manipulation and deceit continue in scripture. We are comforted by their familiar imperfection but frustrated by their lack of change or inability to learn a lesson. Perhaps we should be comforted by that part, too. We might become too discouraged if a character suddenly figured out how to live righteously and without error. So these characters do the opposite of that, but God’s steadfast love endures.

Maybe Jacob’s affection for Rachel really was love at first sight, but he seems as wise to Laban’s fortune as Rebekah was to the gold and camels brought by Isaac’s servant. The seven chapters continue Jacob’s struggle and include the famous wrestling struggle with the figure in the night. Jacob struggles with Laban, Laban plots and chases, and the sisters Jacob marries struggle with each other—who can bear children and who cannot, who Jacob loves more and who Jacob loves less. It’s all a mess.

“The competition between the two sisters for the affection of their husband and for children parallels the earlier sibling rivalry between Esau and Jacob for the birthright and blessing (Genesis 25:29-34; 27:1-40). Rachel’s boast that she has wrestled mightily with her sister and has prevailed (Genesis 30:8) foreshadows her husband Jacob’s

wrestling with the divine being before being renamed “Israel,” the one who strives with God and with humans and prevails (Genesis 32:28).”²

Jacob loved Rachel and waited for her, but Laban does to Jacob and Rachel what Jacob did to Isaac and Esau. You would think a schemer like Jacob would know to look for a plot twist, but maybe the celebrating had gone on long enough that he was feeling as confident as he was amorous. Either way, he never notices he was given Leah instead of her sister, and Jacob is now the victim of Laban’s scheme. He then waits for the wife he really wanted, and the story continues. Curiously, no one says a word about the prohibition against marrying sisters found in Leviticus 18:18. There’s no mention of abhorrence or abomination. Life continues, babies are born, and Jacob lives (albeit in perpetual conflict) with two wives, maybe four. It as though God ignores the drama altogether and listens, instead, to the ignored voices—the unwanted Leah, later Rachel in her despair.

It is this point that Leah notices. She knew she wasn’t the chosen one just as well as Laban did, and somehow it was perceived before she was married that she would be unable to bear children. But God blesses her. Verse 31 reads, “When the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb.” As a result, three of the sons are named for her awareness of God’s presence and goodness. With the birth of Reuben, she hoped for her husband’s love. But with the birth of the next three sons, her attention and affection turn to the Divine.

“She became pregnant again and had another son. ‘God heard,’ she said, ‘that I was unloved and so he gave me this son also.’ She named this one Simeon (God-Heard). She became pregnant yet again—another son. She said, ‘Now maybe my husband will connect with me—I’ve given him three sons!’ That’s why she named him Levi (Connect). She became pregnant a final time and had a fourth son. She said, “This time I’ll praise God.” So she named him Judah (Praise-God). Then she stopped having children.” (Gen. 29:33-35)

At first read, the story seems mostly a love story between Jacob and Rachel—poor Jacob is tricked into marrying the wrong girl, working even longer for the right one, and the master manipulator chases after the whole group of children and grandchildren until he finally gives up and blesses them all a few chapters later.

But the story to follow today is the quiet one. The unwanted sister, the one with the weak eyes, is heard by God. God doesn’t seem interested in stopping the chaos and

² Esther Menn, *WorkingPreacher*: https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2150

scheming that is happening around Leah, but he sees her and hears her. She slowly pays attention, it takes the birth of three children before she fully gets it. God is paying attention to her even if Jacob doesn't care very much. The pain of being second choice and pushed aside is slowly replaced with the comfort and knowledge that God is present, even if silent. God is providing for her, and she praises God for it.

Clay Cotton designs our children's worship bulletins each week, and he said last Sunday, "Other than the advice 'Don't go into business with your in-laws', I don't see what is in this story for children." And Preaching Professor John C. Holbert asks a similar question: "Any moral here? Perhaps not. The stories are about tricksters, card-sharks, less than honest used car salesmen. So it is with the founders of Israel; they are not models for us to emulate. They are rather like us, always ready to get even, always concerned to get the best stuff, always interested in the way to save their own skin. The moral is not: "Be like Jacob!" It is rather "You are like Jacob and Laban and Rebekah." And without the YHWH who chooses you to do a divine work, you would never be anything more than a Grabber, concerned far more for self than God."³

Similarly, Rick Morley writes, "[T]hese stories serve as a reminder that God can work through clowns, and failures—and even liars. And, that's good news, because sometimes our lives dangerously mirror theirs."

In the story of Jacob we get a sense of God's determination to work for good despite the human inclination to trick, sneak, steal, and destroy. God loved and cared for Leah but also Rachel and both Jacob and Laban. Looking at the two trickster men, God kicked neither of them out of the family. This is not our instinct. We like to think there isn't room in God's family for those we despise or those with whom we fiercely disagree. Even when we feign generosity and compassion, we secretly hope the "other" guys get to see just how wrong they are. But the text shows God loves the people who treat us poorly and those we treat poorly.

God's way is of love. God's activity as a character in these stories is moving the goodness plot forward. Humankind stumbles and falls backward, but God finds the opening to invite someone to continue farther onto God's way. God doesn't manipulate the details, God waits. God watches. God listens. Then God acts.

One of the common questions of all times and all faith expressions (including the way of no faith) is, "Why does God allow bad things to happen?" Alternate versions of the questions include: If God is so good, why is there so much suffering in the world? What

³ John C. Holbert: <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/What-Goes-Around-John-Holbert-07-18-2014>

kind of real and good God would allow such pain and sadness in the world?

The text certainly doesn't attempt to answer those questions in full, but the glimpse at God's quiet activity illustrates what the apostle Paul believed about how God moves.

"The apostle Paul makes this affirmation...in the face of many hardships during his missionary work when he says, 'In everything God works for good with those who love him' (Romans 8:28). It is important though to make clear," notes Curtis Fusell, "that Paul does not propose a 'Pollyanna' perspective by this statement, as though if you are on God's side, then nothing but good things will happen to you. If anyone provides a testimony against such a silly, naive perspective, it is Paul. Because of his preaching ministry, Paul suffered imprisonment and countless beatings and often was brought near to death. He received 39 lashes on five occasions, three times he was beaten with rods, on one occasion he was stoned, he was shipwrecked three times, and he had to endure hunger, hardship, toil, and fear from every corner (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). And yet Paul can proclaim, 'We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose' (Romans 8:28)."⁴

This is particularly important to note as the tragic headlines have been pervasive in our news feeds and conversations over the past month. As if our own personal disappointments, failures, and myriad forms of grief weren't enough to carry, our national and international attention is scattered. We carry the news of some 47,000 unaccompanied children at our southern border. We listen and lament as Israel and Palestine lob bombs across wounded borders. Rising to international headlines, the struggle for who will control Iraq continues and leaves no room for Christians who have called that land home since the birth of the tradition. Fleeing extreme persecution for safety, the number of Iraqi Christians living in their homes has gone from almost one million in 2003 to less than half that many today. Anglican leader Andrew White, long working in Baghdad, predicts the total elimination of Christian expression in Iraq. And then the story that we mention and then forget then remember again: the death toll in Syria creeps toward 200,000 people as their civil war rages on.

Just last week I challenged us all to release our small dreams to God's creative, abundant imagination. Then this week we return to the reality of the world's darkness. How can those two concepts—the unquestionable goodness of God and the wicked brokenness of the world—coexist? To speak of tricksters and manipulators in scripture makes human darkness sound like a quirky comic strip. The darkness and brokenness

⁴ Curtis Fussell: <http://www.sermonsuite.com/freebk.php?i=788022470&key=w6dycqar7mkcnbGU>

of our world seems exponential. How, like Leah, do we name God's goodness and watch for God's activity?

Perhaps the answer is also in the dreaming.

We pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, and we have a responsibility in making that happen. We are to participate, like Leah, in naming God's goodness. When we come face to face with our darkness through the broken tales of scripture, we are being invited with each hearing to be made new. We are being invited to participate in God's work of hearing, seeing, blessing, and moving the plot of the whole wide world toward goodness.

It is in the darkness of night that Jacob dreams. It is in the darkness of refugee flight that God speaks. It is in Leah's shame that God moves. And we exist with God between the darkness and the dreaming.

In our dreaming, we welcome God into our reality. We give ourselves to God as partners and workers. And we commit ourselves to live out the words of St. Teresa of Avila:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours;
yours are the only hands with which He can do His work.
Yours are the only feet with which He can go about the world;
yours are the only eyes through which His compassion can shine forth
upon a troubled world.
Christ has no body on earth but yours.

May God bless the hearing and the living of this word. Amen.