

THE NARRATIVES OF OUR FAITH: A STORY OF DECEIT

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Genesis 29:15-28; Romans 8:26-39

Let us pray:

O God, you have brought us here this morning to a time of reflection and rest. Calm our souls within us, and give us a sense of your peace that will refresh us.

Keep us close to Christ that we may be closer to one another because of his wondrous love. In his name we pray. Amen.

For some reason, I am finding lately that faced with a handful of biblical texts to choose from, either for a sermon, a bible study, or my own reading, I tend to gravitate towards the most difficult and obscure in the bunch. Perhaps this was trained in to me as a graduate student in seminary, where we were encouraged to tackle all that is problematic in theology and biblical studies. Or perhaps, and I think this is a more likely explanation, it reveals my kinship for that which is enigmatic, subtle, and complicated in our faith. While I crave an easy answer for a problem, I know better. I know that there are rarely easy answers in life, and any easy answers we receive in the context of our faith ought to be looked at with a critical eye. And so I find both comfort and challenge in discerning God's presence in the chewier stories of the Bible.

Over the next few weeks, I will be focusing my sermons on the narratives of our faith. Story-telling in the Bible. Romance, mystery, drama- it's all here, bound together inconceivably into a single text that tells who and whose we are, from the very beginning of history through this moment. There are many stories that are already inscribed upon our hearts, so familiar are they to our ears. And there are others, like the one I will tell today, that are less familiar. And each has a truth to tell about God.

It can be frustrating at times to detect knowledge and truth from a story. Like the ancient story of the blind men standing around an elephant- each man offers a unique and equally true description of the elephant, but none can agree that they're talking about the same thing. Such is the challenge of our faith- to read the narratives of our faith and attempt to discern a common truth about who God is and how God is present in our lives. I believe the more we read these stories, as many as we can, the broader and deeper our context becomes for understanding our faith. I believe the more we enjoy these stories and become familiar with them, the richer and more meaningful the entire Bible becomes as the Word of God. And I believe that the more we share these stories with one another, in the context of worship, the more clarity is revealed about who we are as a community of faith.

And so we embark, entering the cycle of Jacob stories midway, arriving at an odd juncture that will surely leave us all contemplating how this story of deceit fits into the broader narrative of our faith.

The Jacob cycle- comprising the stories about Jacob and his family, is found in chapters 25-35 of the Book of Genesis. It is quite possible that the Jacob cycle is some of the very oldest material in the Bible. Stories of Jacob may have been circulating orally in parts of Israel before the invention of writing. Really, really old stories. Yet the themes are ageless, and we are still shocked and entertained by the saga of this trickster, this underdog, named Jacob. His name literally means ‘heel grabber,’ named thus because he came out second from his mother’s womb, holding on tight to his brother’s heel- already a troublemaker *in utero*. Before we meet up with him in today’s story, much has already taken place. We have learned that he is his mother’s favorite, just as his brother Esau is his father’s favorite. We know that Jacob has a plan for his own upward mobility, grabbing his brother’s birthright in exchange for a bowl of lentil stew and some bread. And finally, following his mother’s own suggestion, he grabs also his brother’s blessing, reserved for the firstborn child, by deceiving his blind, elderly father.

Jacob has shown up at his maternal uncle Laban’s door in flight from his bloodthirsty brother, hoping to find amnesty and a wife from his mother’s clan. In the text just preceding what we’ve read today, Jacob encounters Laban’s younger daughter, Rachel, by her father’s well, and the sparks of romance fly. Jacob kisses Rachel, presumably a chaste kiss on the hand or cheek, and bursts into tears. Can you hear the music swell? And thus we enter our reading for today:

Having been in his uncle’s home now for a month, Jacob finally hears the words he’s been waiting for, “Just because you are a kinsman, should you serve me for nothing? Tell me,” Laban says, “what shall your wages be?” And Jacob, confounded by his good fortune says quickly, “I will labor seven years for you, if you will give me your younger daughter Rachel’s hand in marriage.” And Laban agrees. So happy is Jacob about the promise of marrying his soul mate that the seven years pass as if only a few days, so deep is his love for Rachel. And at the stroke of midnight of the final night of his seven-year contract, Jacob knocks on Laban’s door and says, “Give me my wife, for my time is fulfilled.” As the wedding day approaches, Jacob, used to grabbing for all that he has, is giddy at the prospect of receiving the love of his life without the trickery or deception that has characterized his life up until that point.

The night of the wedding, Laban threw a great feast. It is perhaps important to note for the story that the Hebrew word for feast, ‘mishteh,’ translates literally as ‘drinking party.’ At the appointed hour, Laban’s daughter enters her new husband’s abode, her face covered in a traditional veil... The next morning, Jacob rolls over to see his beautiful wife, only to discover

that it is Leah lying beside him, not Rachel! The trickster Jacob has been tricked. The deceiver has been deceived. And poor Leah, eldest daughter with the ‘weak’ eyes, must look into the disappointed face of her new husband.

Jacob, in a rage, storms up to his father-in-law, demanding an explanation. And Laban, with a wicked grin, points out that custom requires the eldest must marry before the youngest, and how could anyone expect him to marry Rachel off before her elder sister. How bitterly familiar these words sound to Jacob, himself so recently run out of his own home for sabotaging the privilege of the firstborn. In the end, a compromise is struck, allowing Jacob to marry Rachel also, in return for seven more years of work on Laban’s property. The second wedding feast, just a week after the first, can not have been so joyful. What the narrator says next, just outside today’s reading, foreshadows the new sibling rivalry that will begin between Rachel and Leah: “And Jacob cohabited with Rachel also; indeed, he loved Rachel more than Leah.”

This is not a feel-good story about the morally upright chosen one of God. This is a story of deceit that plays both ways. The deceivers- Jacob and Laban. The pawns- Rachel and Leah. The noticeably absent figure in the story- God. This is not the most likely cast of characters for the narratives of our faith. But this is what we get. And by now, that should not surprise us in the book of Genesis. It is of such messy stuff that ‘beginnings’ are made.

God has chosen a trickster and a morally ambiguous figure to carry the promise of Israel. We know this because just prior to Jacob’s first encounter with Rachel at the well, Jacob dreamed a dream of a ladder to heaven, with the angels of God ascending and descending the ladder. And the Lord stood beside him and said:

“I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

What are we to make of this odd association between Jacob and God? Well, we know that God is partial to marginal people. God is drawn to those on the fringe, those traditionally lacking power and influence. As the second born in a society that privileged the firstborn, Jacob definitely fits into this category of those lacking traditional power and influence. So, on some level, it may be true that God is the God of tricksters- those who must use guile and deceit to overcome the structures of power. It is this earthly man, Jacob, with all his faults, through whom the resilient purposes of God are being worked out. The purpose of God is made operative in the places even

of scandal and deception. Perhaps it is precisely because of Jacob's doubtful character that God chooses him to fulfill the promise of God's chosen people.

Jacob is not the only chosen one in this story. The women, too, are chosen as the bearers of God's promise. Though the story's patriarchy is hard to listen to, God is also on the side of Rachel and Leah. Like Jacob, they are marginalized, and like Jacob, they are not without their character flaws. Yet Leah and Rachel, even their maidservants Zilpah and Bilhah, will serve as the creators of transition and transformation for the people of God. Through their wombs the tribes of Israel will be born. Their power is circumscribed, but their influence in the private realm cannot be overstated. God's work through these women is hidden in these texts, yet it is there, as the creative blessing of the family of Jacob with children of the promise.

Even though God does not appear as a character in this story, God is most definitely present. God is in the midst of us, even in conflict. Within the dynamics of a dysfunctional family system such as we witness in this story, God is present. Within a story of deceit, God is working in and through the conflict to reveal God's greater promises for humanity. God is looking out for Jacob and his family.

The truth to be told is that God is looking out for us, in the same way, in the midst of our own dysfunctional family systems and conflicts. God promised Jacob, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go... for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." And God kept that promise. We are the descendants of that promise, and God is still present with us.

Paul's letter to the Romans heightens and expands this motif of God's presence among us, in light of Christ's appearance on earth and the revelation of the Triune God- Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit. The promise of God's presence remains the same:

"Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword...

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

It is impossible to be separated from the love and presence of Christ. No outward circumstance, no inward fault or failing, can push God away. God is a keeper of promises, and God has promised to abide with us. We will not be left alone to our own resources to bear the burdens of this time. Our God will be in our midst, even when God seems absent from the story, or when the

story seems too lascivious or violent or deceptive to have a place for God. Even there, especially there, God is present, promising never to leave us, wherever we go.

Let us pray:

God of wonders, you work your will and claim us to serve your purposes as you have revealed them in Jesus Christ. Take us and all we are and all we do; forgive what is imperfect and flawed and show us how to make amends, so that our lives may be better witnesses to the presence of our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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