

Wishin' and Hopin' and Thinkin' and Prayin'  
Genesis 29-30, selected verses  
Romans 8:26-39

“We know that all things work together for good for those that love God, to those that are called according to his purpose....For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

What are we to make of this story in the wake of a week filled with equally, um, colorful characters and tumultuous events? On the surface, it is a story written to get us from the last singular patriarch to the twelve tribes of Israel, tribes that needed four women to produce them! Getting down and dirty, it is a rollicking account of passionate love and passionless marriage, of fecundity and barrenness, of deception and jealousy, that only belatedly mentions the God who keeps covenant in spite of and with the help of merely human wishin' and hopin' and thinkin' and prayin'.

The story begins at a well, where so many stories in the Bible begin. Boy meets girl. Girl runs home to tell her father of the meeting. Father gives his blessing so that the daughter who was the property of her father may become the property of her husband. The arresting addition in Jacob's meeting of Rachel is what we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century take to be romantic love. When Jacob sees her with her father's sheep, he rolls the stone off the well in violation of local custom and as a sign of his virility. Then as her flock drinks from the well, Jacob kisses Rachel and weeps. With the added detail that Rachel is graceful and beautiful, we know it must have been love at first sight.

But if love, why the tears? According to the rabbis, Jacob wept because “He foresaw by divine inspiration that Rachel would not be buried together with him.” According to Avivah Zornberg, from the first kiss on, all of Jacob's acts “express the love that is, from its dawning, haunted with death. The intimation that he and Rachel will be divided in death engenders *passion*, which, paradoxically, will bind him to her as the wife of his quest. As *thanatos* [the God of gentle death] enters the imagination, *eros* comes to life. The suffering that informs passionate love gives it eternal resonance.” If you have ever loved someone breathlessly, you know this.

Yet this coincidence of desire and death can also be traced back through Jacob's desire for his brother's blessing and birthright, back through Abram and Sarai's desire for a child, back through the desire of the inhabitants of the earth for fame in the city of Babel, back through Cain's jealousy of Abel, back to the desire in the garden for the fruit of the one forbidden tree. There in the garden, God said to Adam, “Because you have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; [because you desired the forbidden fruit,] in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life....you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Desire and death. Built into our human being, it seems, is an inextricable link between our wishin' and hopin' and thinkin' and prayin' for what we desperately desire and our fearful anticipation of the loss of the object of our desire.

Reading Jacob's story through God's judgment of Adam and Eve, Jacob toils not seven but fourteen years, all the while wishin' and hopin' and thinkin' and prayin' until he acquires the object of his desire. Reading our stories through God's same judgment, we spend our one, precious and unrepeatable life animated by a passionate desire for the things of the moment that do not last—lust and wealth and power and physical beauty and prominence. Remembering that the story of Jacob is the story of a nation, this is the story of God's people whose preference for lust and wealth and power and prominence foreshadows our all-American own.

That is why Leon Kass warns us to “be on our guard not to let our own romantic beliefs blind us to the question of where the deception [in this story] really occurs. Jacob loves Rachel—and so do most of us with him. But does God share this preference?” Apparently not. Even though God is absent until the middle of the story, I think it is safe to assume that God is using every deceptive and jealous character in this dysfunctional family as the near at hand means to keep the promise God made to Jacob at Bethel. God of course knows what Jacob does not know: Rachel is barren. If God's promise of offspring becoming as ubiquitous as the dust of the earth is to be kept, Jacob must bed Rachel's older sister Leah. Here is where our wishin' and hopin' and thinkin' and prayin'—what we do to acquire the life we believe will be our best life—comes up against what God is doing in the world, sometimes by deceptive means, to keep us headed toward the future for which we were made.

Not by chance, then, but for the sake of keeping God's covenant, Laban tricks the trickster on his wedding night. Having just served Laban for seven years so that he could wed Rachel, Jacob demands Laban give him the wife he has earned. Laban instead leads his veiled, firstborn daughter with her weak eyes into the wedding chamber. Now

second born Jacob, who tricked his blind father into blessing him as if he were the firstborn, is about to be blindsided in the dark by his father-in-law's firstborn as if she were his second.

"All night long," the midrash goes, "he called her Rachel, and she answered him. In the morning, however, 'Behold, it was Leah!' She replied, 'Is there a teacher without pupils? Did not your father call you Esau, and you answered him! So too did you call me, and I answered you!'" "Where is visible beauty in the dark?" Kass asks. "Jacob with stars in his eyes, is shown here to be blinded, not necessarily by lust or drink but by the love of the beautiful itself. He does not know one wife from the other except superficially." But the irony deepens as Laban reminds Jacob that under the law of primogeniture—a law that privileges the firstborn even when the firstborn is female—the younger cannot not given in marriage before the older. By this same law, of course, Leah should be the wife of Esau, except that God has previously and even deviously subverted the law of primogeniture by choosing Jacob to inherit the promise. Jacob's desire is thus disrupted by his turbulent match with Leah, Zornberg observes. Disrupted but, I would add, the flame is not extinguished!

*Still* determined to have Rachel, Jacob agrees to work seven more years as Laban's servant if Laban will give him Rachel *now*. "Complete the [wedding] week with this one," Laban says, "and we will give you the other also." "So Jacob went in to Rachel also," we read, "and he loved Rachel more than Leah." Finally, in response to Leah's plight, the God of the less-loved appears as a character in this story. God notices the fix God has put Leah in by placing her in a loveless marriage in order to keep his promise to her husband. Now the wishin' and hopin' and thinkin' and prayin' of the women becomes crucial to the future of the covenant! As one commentator [Rachael Havrelock] notes, "Neither male loyalty nor devotion can repair the gap between humanity and God that can be bridged only by female initiative. Whereas God calls upon male heroes in distant locales and stipulates clear covenantal terms, the heroines must go to extreme lengths in order to be recognized and improvise a kind of covenant never sanctified, as such, that nonetheless is marked in their bodies and secures their memory." To keep the plot going, God opens Leah's womb.

Four baby boys are born whose names reveal the pathos of Leah's life. Simultaneously, Rachel continues childless and is, in fact, at her wit's end, blaming Jacob who blames God. Taking a chapter out of Sarai's own desperation for a child, Rachel tells Jacob to bed her maid Bilhah who promptly has two more sons for Jacob, two more tribes for Israel. Then because Jacob has ceased going into Leah, Leah gives *her* maid Zilpah to Jacob and Zilpah has Jacob's seventh and eighth sons. This would seem to be literally a race of rivals to the bottom—an ancient version of *Real Housewives*—were it not for the fact that the women do what they do in the service of God's promises! Next, in order to get her hands on Leah's aphrodisiac, I kid you not, Rachel trades Jacob's sexual attention for the aphrodisiac and Leah has two more sons by Jacob. Finally, finally, finally God appears again, remembers Rachel and opens her womb. She gives birth to Joseph, but then dies (remember Jacob's tears?) just outside Bethlehem, as Benjamin is born. There she is buried in a tomb on the road the exiles will take to Babylon. Here, hundreds of years hence, she will "weep for her children that are no more" as Jacob lies buried with Leah in the tomb of the Patriarchs at Hebron. Moreover, it is Leah's sons, the Levites, who will become the priests of Israel, and Leah's sons from the line of Judah who will lead to David and finally to Jesus. Bottom line: God chose Leah and through Leah's offspring, thirty-eight generations later, God chose unlovable and unlovely us.

What, in God's name, has this story to tell us? What help does it have to give us in a week that has been a race of rivals to the bottom no matter what side of the aisle you favor? Perhaps only this: the God who promised to be with Jacob and to keep him and to bring him home last Sunday is the same God who chose the deceivers and the tricksters as well as the unloved and the unlovely to accomplish God's purposes this Sunday. Likely God is still doing the same here and now, at this very moment in human history. God is the trickster's trickster, the deceiver's deceiver, who uses our wishin' and hopin' and thinkin' and prayin' for God's purposes. God knows the details we do not know but has let us in on the one detail that transforms every other: because God is with us and keeps us and will bring us home to the love for which we were made, we may dare to believe that that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose. Therefore we may trust that nothing—neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the God of Jacob and Leah and Rachel and Bilhah and Zilpah, the same God whose love we know in Jesus Christ. Amen.