

LEAH
Genesis 29:15-23, 25-28, 30-35

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on July 26, 2020, the Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. The church was closed for the Coronavirus pandemic and the sermon was preached to an empty sanctuary for livestreaming.

Then Laban said to Jacob, “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?” Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah’s eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.” So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.”

So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” Laban said, “This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.” Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife. So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for another seven years.

When the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren. Leah conceived and bore a son, and she named him Reuben; for she said, “Because the Lord has looked on my affliction; surely now my husband will love me.” She conceived again and bore a son, and said, “Because the Lord has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also”; and she named him Simeon. Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, “Now this time my husband will be joined to me, because I have borne him three sons”; therefore he was named Levi. She conceived again and bore a son, and said, “This time I will praise the Lord”; therefore she named him Judah; then she ceased bearing.

Today we continue our journey through ancient streets and stories of Genesis. We turn our attention to the complicated surprise of Leah in Jacob’s wedding bed in place of her younger sister Rachel. We will look at what Leah brings to us through her story in the sacred book of our sacred though flawed origins.

Let us pray: “Sartre wrote: ‘The yearning of rigidity is in us all...in which [we] never become anything else but what [we] already [are].’ Lord, may the words of this sermon – the words of all sermons – be such that “the yearning of rigidity” is not so impenetrable that “we never become anything but what we already are.’ Lead us to become what you would have us be and do. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

I.

We may remember from childhood Sunday School the odd marriages of Jacob to Rachel and her older sister Leah.

After tricking his twin brother Esau out of both Esau's birthright¹ and blessing,² Jacob flees for his life to his mother's brother Laban.³ He meets Laban's younger daughter Rachel at a well where he is immediately smitten. Her father invites Jacob into the home, and after about a month, he approaches Jacob and says:

'Because we are family, I feel I should pay you something for your work. Tell me, what shall your wages be?'

'I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel,' Jacob says.

Laban responds:

'It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man...'

So Jacob serves seven years for Rachel, and in an unusual flourish of romantic descriptiveness, the Genesis narrator says, these seven years "seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her."

But on their wedding night, Laban substitutes his older daughter Leah for Rachel in the wedding bed in which the couple will consummate their marriage. When Jacob awakens the next morning, "[Behold,] it is Leah" who lies next to him.

Jacob says to Laban:

'What is this you have done to me?... Why...have you deceived me?'

Laban says:

This is not done in our country—giving the *younger* before the firstborn. Complete the week of [Leah], and we will give you [Rachel] also in return for serving...another seven years.

Jacob loves Rachel more than Leah and serves Laban for seven more years, even as he is married to both sisters.

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In the world to which we are accustomed – in which love leads to marriage rather than marriage to love, in which both parties have choice, and in which marriage is to only one person, the differences with the world of Rachel and Leah and Jacob can make this story seem laughable, offensive, or just too plain ridiculous to speak to us. But if we stick with it, as is the case with most Biblical stories, we can learn something from it, and leave this hour of worship not quite the same person we were when the hour began.⁴

II.

The first thing we see in this story is a matter of *simple justice being enacted*.

¹ Genesis 25:29-34.

² Genesis 27:1-40.

³ Genesis 27:41-45.

⁴ I am once again grateful to Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, in *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* (New York: Schocken Books, 2009), for insights on Leah, Rachel, and Jacob. See particularly Chapter 9 of this book.

Jacob's name means "the Supplanter." Up to this point in Genesis Jacob has been a trickster, a con artist, what Melville called a "confidence man."⁵

- Jacob has tricked his brother Esau out of his birthright.
- Jacob has tricked his father Isaac into bestowing upon him the blessing that should rightly go to Esau as first born.
- He will soon trick Laban out of some profits with an elaborate scheme involving striped and speckled sheep.⁶

So when Jacob falls in love with Rachel, works seven years for her hand, awakens to discover it is Leah who occupies the wedding bed, we cannot help but enjoy the trick that has been played on the trickster. "You reap whatever you sow," the Apostle Paul will write two thousand years later.⁷ When we see people reaping what they sow, we draw some satisfaction that justice is being done.

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We are hoping against hope for justice these days. I listened to novelist Marilynne Robinson Friday afternoon. She was asked what she thought about all the civil unrest we are seeing. While disowning the violence we are seeking, she said: "I'm actually encouraged," she said. "I think we are waking up. I think there is hope."⁸

- Justice often takes a long time to come, but come it does.
- It can be centuries between the last time justice paid us a visit and the next time it will knock at our door, but pay us a visit it will do.
- Justice is often episodic, muddled, short-lived.
- It may come in only one case in ten, but can one can grow into two, two into three, and so on.
- Justice may come at the ballot box or in the jury box.
- It may come in the legislative session of the most surprising state in the union.
- It may come through the leader we least expect to deliver it.
- Justice may come in the court of public opinion or the court of family consensus.

⁵ Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* (1857).

⁶ Genesis 30:25-31:55.

⁷ Galatians 6:7. These words were spoken by Senator Sam Ervin, a Presbyterian elder, at the conclusion of the Watergate hearings in 1974.

⁸ I am paraphrasing Robinson, based on what I heard at a seminar sponsored by the Trinity Forum. The video should be available soon at <https://www.ttf.org/videos-ttf/>.

- It may come in the disciplinary hearing or the awards ceremony.
- It may come in the admissions decision or the dissertation defense.
- It may come on the battlefield or in the parole board.
- It may come in the granting of the divorce or the reading of the will.
- Sometimes justice comes when flags are retired and new ones designed; when monuments are moved and new ones erected; when team names are changed and new ones sought.

Justice rarely comes with sufficient speed, especially to those seeking rather than granting it. It often *disrupts* peace before it *brings* peace but it cannot live *without* peace nor peace without it for each to be true and lasting. Justice is often as absent as shelter in an open field when a sudden thunderstorm sends bolts of lightning earthward. It can seem as silent as a choir in a sanctuary on a Sunday morning during a pandemic. But through shelter and sound justice comes, and when he does, we smile inwardly, break into applause.

“When morning came, [*Behold,*] it was Leah.”

III.

In Scripture Leah is *more* than simply a tool for justice to come to Jacob. When we read her story carefully, guided by others, paying attention to what is *said* and *not said*, the *gaps* between events, Leah emerges as a person who has her own sense of agency, of will, of growth and change over time.

It is hard for us to imagine the world in which Leah lives, in which marriages are arranged and love – if it develops at all – comes *after* rather than *before* marriage. But as Leah’s adulthood unfolds – intertwined with Jacob’s and Rachel’s – Leah endures the humiliation of sharing a husband with another wife who is more loved and with whom she is locked in fertility contest that develops, not just to produce a child, but to produce an heir to the promises of God given to Jacob’s grandparents for land, descendants, and blessing.⁹

Though in one verse the narrator tells us that Jacob “hates” Leah,¹⁰ in the prior verse the narrator has said that Jacob simply loves Rachel “more than” Leah.¹¹ Whatever the degree and intensity of love, Leah gives birth to the first four of the thirteen children Jacob will father in a twenty-two year period starting when he is eighty-four!¹² (Yes, you heard it right.)

No matter how all this happens, the story lies in the *names* Leah gives to her children.

- When the first child, Reuben, is born, she gives him a name which means “Surely now my husband will love me.”

⁹ Genesis 12:1-4.

¹⁰ Genesis 29:31.

¹¹ Genesis 29:30.

¹² Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* (New York: Schocken Books, 2009), 267-268. According to the commentator Rashi, Jacob is 84 when his first child is born (Genesis 29:21).

- Then Simeon comes next, and his name means “Because the Lord has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also.”
- Then Levi, whose name means: “This time my husband is joined to me.”

But between child number three and child number four, something happens within Leah’s sense of who she is and who God is. When her fourth child, Judah, is born, his name means: “This time, I will praise *the Lord*.” Do you notice the subtle change: Her first three children are named after her desire for Jacob to love her; Judah is named honoring her praise and gratitude to God. “*This time I will praise the Lord*.”

The narrator doesn’t tell us how this change comes about.

- Perhaps it was through prayer or study of Scripture or a process of maturing or the guidance of a mentor or an intervening tragedy or a flash of lightning from heaven or a visit from an angel or a direct hearing of the voice of God.
- Leah’s moment of gratitude and praise will later have its backsliding, as Leah reverts to trying to produce more sons to capture Jacob’s deeper love,¹³ but the choice of a name for her fourth child focuses on *God in heaven* rather than *her spouse on earth*.
- It thus represents a highwater mark in her faith to which she can return when doubt and despair set in.
- To name her son “*This time I will praise the Lord*” is a bold and beautiful affirmation.

Leah’s praise bears itself out in future generations. Though Rachel is more widely remembered than Leah, for reasons legitimate and poignant,¹⁴ it is still Leah to whom Judah is born, in whose line follows Boaz, Jesse, David, and ultimately Christ the Lord.¹⁵ Leah is an ancestor to the Messiah.

IV.

Whether you are male or female, adult or child, parent or non-parent, I cannot really give you an instruction sheet on how to move, like Leah, from longstanding disappointment to praise and gratitude. I can only point to the fact that the birth of Judah was the occasion of a change of heart within Leah, a change that moves her from seeking *Jacob’s* approval to expressing *praise and gratitude to God*.

¹³ Genesis 30:9-24.

¹⁴ As the story continues in the remainder of Genesis, Jacob will focus his attention on his two sons younger sons who soon will be born to Rachel – Joseph and Benjamin. Leah fades into the background as Rachel becomes more poignantly remembered as she dies giving birth to her second son Benjamin (Genesis 35:16-21). Her tears are invoked centuries later in the words of Jeremiah (31:15), when children are lost; and we church in the hear her lament anew when, in Matthew’s gospel (2:13-18), Herod seeks to kill all children in and around Bethlehem two years old or under in order to eliminate the one born King of the Jews. In response to this slaughter of the innocents:

A voice [is] heard in Ramah,
Wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children...

¹⁵ See Matthew 1:1-17.

In times that are normal, our praise and gratitude can develop over time. In times that are out of joint – such as our own – when we may be isolated and nervous, perhaps bored and fearful at the same time, the movement to praise and gratitude may be more sudden, more intense, more unpredictable, throughout the day.

It is this way with me. Usually I wake up early ready to go, but some days now I wake up feeling like there is a heavy blanket on my chest – not as a symptom from Coronavirus (I trust), but a symptom of our times: the routine of the day same as the routine of yesterday, the news that is never new and never good, the fact that I check the calendar a couple of times to make sure I know what day it is, the fact that I will put another load of laundry in not because we lack for clean clothes but because I have to have something besides food to get me up from in front of the screen.

But when I see a character like Leah – inside the Bible, in life – the movement she makes from disappointment to gratitude, from isolation to praise, reminds me it can be done, sometimes as effort, sometimes as gifted breakthrough, sometimes even in stillness and silence.

I seek such movement. I pray for it. For myself. For my family. For our nation. For you, the congregation I serve. And along with the justice that Leah brings to Jacob, I thank God for Leah's of the world who bring us both the power of praise and the promise of justice.

Amen.

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