

Whose Side is God On?
Proper 12
July 27, 2014

Genesis 29:15-28
Psalm 128
Romans 8: 26-39
Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

The discussion at Men's Group this Friday was especially heated.

- The topic of the morning opened with a conversation about children as innocent victims, but then we got embroiled in defending the actions of the combatants in the Israel/Gaza conflict.
- There were exceptionally strong feelings on all sides... Fortunately, we had all checked our weapons at the door, so no one was able to exercise their 2nd Amendment rights...
- But the discussion we had had about innocent victims was a foreshadowing of what we heard in this morning's readings, particularly in the first reading from Genesis, about Jacob and Laban, Rachel and Leah

Frist, let's review the story that we've heard from the Hebrew Testament during the past few weeks:

- Isaac's wife Rebekah gave birth to two twin sons: Esau (the first born) and Jacob (the second born)
- Esau sells his birthright to Jacob for bowl of lentils and Jacob's father, Isaac, is tricked into giving Jacob the blessing that should have been given to Esau
- Esau hated his brother because of the blessing, and swears revenge on Jacob.
- Rebekah heard about this threat against her favored son, Jacob, and sent him off to her brother Laban in Haran (on the present-day border of Turkey and the Kurdish territory of Iraq)
- When he arrives in Haran, Jacob first sees Laban's daughter, Rachel, as she leads her flock to the local well. Immediately Jacob falls in love with her. (She was, after all, "graceful and beautiful.") At the same time, as they met, Jacob was able, by himself, to roll away the huge stone that covered the well—which typically required the efforts of four shepherds—so I would think that Rachel might also have thought that Jacob would be a pretty good catch, as well.

Which brings us to today's reading: Jacob contracts to work for Laban for 7 years in exchange allowing Rachel to become his wife.

- But after 7 years, and just after the wedding feast for Jacob and Rachel, and late at night, and after much wine, apparently, Laban brought Leah into Jacob's tent.

- Jacob, the Lentil Soup and First-Born Blessing Trickster receives his due reward. He is tricked by Laban, who says that it would have been against the custom of the country for him to give Jacob the younger daughter before the elder one.
- So Laban wrests from Jacob a promise to fulfill the bridal week with Leah, after which he would be awarded Rachel, along with a contract-extension to work 7 more years for this second daughter.

There's something missing in this story... And what is that?

- Throughout the Isaac/Jacob epic that we've heard over the past three weeks, we've see God actively involved in the affairs of this family. Blessings have abounded in the story thus far:
 - Laban, Rebekah's brother, recognizes that the selection of Rebekah to be the wife of Isaac is the work of God.
 - "This is the Lord's doing," Laban says, "We have nothing to say about it."
 - God promises Rebekah that she will give birth to two sons and the younger shall lead the elder
 - As Jacob travels northward, escaping from his brother, God appears to Jacob in the dream at Bethel and promises him that his descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth.
- But in this morning's story, what's missing...is God.
 - God stays out of the confrontation between Laban and Jacob. He doesn't take sides at all.
 - Which brings up these questions: How do we see God in this story? What role does God play in all this? Whose side is God on?
- Those questions are answered in the very next line that appears in Genesis, right after the conclusion of this morning's reading. *This* is when God appears:
 - (v.31) "When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren."
 - Leah gave birth to Reuben, ...and then to Simeon, Levi, and Judah, then Issachar, Zebulon, and Dinah
 - Each time, she hoped that her husband would love her. But that never seemed to be.

So what lessons can we learn about God's role in this story?

- Lesson 1. God takes the side of innocent victims.
 - Not Jacob, the victim of Laban's trick.
 - After all, Jacob, the trickster, deserved what he got.
 - Jacob and Laban are two of a kind, and God is staying out of the discussion.
 - No, God intercedes to help the real victim of this story: Leah

- Leah, who is the pawn in her father's trick;
 - Leah, who is forced by Laban into a marriage that can only bring trouble
 - Leah, who hoped—by having children—that she could gain the love of someone who did not want her;
 - Leah, who is condemned to a life of being hated by Jacob.
- God acting on Leah's behalf is an important source of hope for us today.
 - Dale noted in his homily last week: "As an inveterate newspaper reader for more than 60 years I have never seen a world so penetrated with tragedy, with so little feeling of hope."
 - For me, what makes the news so tragic is the presence of so many innocent victims: airline passengers, Palestinian kids, Israeli teenagers, and Central American children...
 - The tricksters play their games and we wonder where God is in all this.
- Yet, in this story of Leah, God hears the cries of an innocent victim ...and God's willingness to act on behalf of innocent victims is one of the central stories of the Bible
 - God said to Cain after Cain killed Abel: "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!"
 - He heard the cries of the oppressed peoples in Egypt: "And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them." (Ex 2:24-25)
 - God expressed his special concern for impoverished victims in the laws he gave to the Israelites at Mount Sinai: "If you lend money to one of my people who is needy, do not treat it like a business deal...When they cry out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate." (Ex 22:25)[CEB]
 - God's hearing the cry of the oppressed is mentioned in at least 38 of the Psalms...e.g., Psalm 72: For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help."
- Lesson 2. Yes, God will hear the cry of his people; and yes, God will deliver his people, but life will still be messy.
 - Today's Psalm, 128, is a reflection of the blessings that Jacob and Leah and Rachel had:
 - "Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD."
 - Yes, Leah was blessed with children, but even after all these children that God gave to her, Jacob still didn't love her. Life was still a mess.

- God did deliver her from evil, but the underlying family dynamics were still in place... which brings us to...
- Lesson 3: God does not insist that people—or families—be perfect before choosing to work in and through them.
 - Abraham and his sons and his grandsons—and all their families—are dysfunctional in one way or another
 - And yet, God was able to work through all the complexities to bring about the birth of Jacob’s children and to enable goodness to emerge
 - And from that we can take great hope.
 - Because the more we examine the family of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and the more we hear about fights between wives and hand-maidens, sister and sister, brother and brother, uncle and cousin, the more the complications in our own families look much like the past
 - And if we shake our heads in wonder at the messy relationships in extended family of Isaac, we can certainly be assured that if God can make good out of that mess in Genesis, there is certainly hope for God’s actions in our present world as well.
 - ...which brings us to the final lesson from today’s readings:
- Lesson 4: Be assured that God will act on behalf of innocent victims, but all in God’s time.
 - The barren Rebekah wanted children, and she and Isaac wanted them *now*. The barren Rachel wanted children, and she gave her servant, Bilhah, to Jacob, in the hope of speeding up the process.
 - Yes, God did give these women the children they wanted, but God doesn’t work on demand.
 - There is a refrain in the African American religious community that is good for Scandahoovians like myself to remember as well:
 - That saying is, “Jesus never comes when I call him, but he always comes in time.”
 - It’s a reminder that God will deliver his people...that we can be certain that God will, soon or later, provide.
 - The parables of Jesus we heard in today’s Gospel lesson remind us that God’s actions may seem small and ineffective, but, as Jesus assures us, they will grow:
 - To the size of a life-sustaining mustard tree
 - They will grow like a small amount of yeast that adds leaven to a large amount of dough.
 - In Jesus’ world, justice and injustice live side by side,
 - Just as they did in the lives of Jacob and Laban, Rachel and Leah
 - However, at the end, God will ensure that justice will prevail; God will establish the kingdom.
 - “Jesus never comes when I call him, but he always comes in time.”