

Are You There God? It's me, Rachel.

Genesis 29-33 by Patty Friesen (July 30/23)

Are you there God? It's me, Rachel. I'm so in love! I just met this great guy named Jacob. I met Jacob when I came to water the sheep by the well the other day. All the shepherds would gather there at the same time and then we would move the heavy stone covering the well and water all the flocks at once. When I brought my flock, Jacob rolled away the stone and watered my sheep. Apparently he had asked the others who I was and after he watered my sheep, he started crying and said he was my cousin from Canaan. I was so shocked I ran home to tell my father Laban and he came back to the well to bring Jacob home. He complained that years ago, he had to go back for Carson, Abraham's servant after Auntie Rebecca ran home from the well, leaving Carson behind.

Jacob stayed with us a month and we fell in love. Jacob helped out around the farm but dad said, "Even though you are our relative - why should you work for free? Name your wages." Jacob said, "I will work 7 years for your daughter Rachel." Dad said, "Better I give her to you than some other guy." And Jacob worked 7 years for me though he said it felt like a few days because of his love for me. After the 7 years were up - we planned our wedding feast but on our wedding night, dad did a cruel thing and I've never forgiven him for it. He dressed up Leah like me and put her in the marriage bed - the cow and Jacob must have been too drunk to notice.

He sure noticed when he woke up in the morning. Enraged, he went to dad and said why have you deceived me? Dad said, "It's not done in our country that the younger should marry before the eldest daughter. Complete the honeymoon and I'll

give you the other one for another seven years.” Things were a bit rough for women back then and this love triangle was a disaster.

Are you there God? It's me again, Rachel. Are you deaf? How many generations of this family have called on you to help us get pregnant? I've been praying to our household fertility gods but they are deaf too. You are the God of Life - El Shaddai so help me give life. My sister Leah is cranking out boys left and right - Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah. She thought those boys would make Jacob love her more but he still loved me best. The situation made me crazy enough to give my servant Bilhah to Jacob to surrogate me sons - which she did - Dan and Naphtali - meaning winner for I am wrestling with my sister for Jacob's affection and I'm winning. Except now she's given her maid Zilpah to Jacob and has 2 sons by her Gad and Asher. Then Leah started cranking them out again - Isaachar and Zebulun and a daughter Dinah. Finally, finally you have heard my cry and have given me Joseph and please, please give me one more.

Are you there God? It's me, Rachel. We've broken up with my dad Laban who had been cheating Jacob out of his wages for decades. Jacob had suffered the heat and cold and sleeplessness for decades tending Dad's flocks. Apparently you came to him one night and reminded him that you are the God of Bethel - the altar where you first met Jacob and promised to be with him and that he should go back home to Isaac. You said you heard of Jacob's struggle with dad and would be with him so we took the flocks owed us and fled in the night.

It's been scary. Dad caught up with us and there was a big yelling match between he and Jacob but they made a covenant of peace and built a stone altar to the God of Abraham, Jacob's grandfather and the God of Nahor, my grandfather and asked the God of both our families to watch over us.

Are you there God? Are you the guy who snuck up and wrestled with Jacob last night while we were waiting to cross the Jabbock River to see Esau? You started the fight but you have to admit Jacob gave you a run for your money until you pulled that dirty little trick move that put Jacob's hip out of joint leaving him with a limp but Jacob the grabber, still wouldn't let go of you. He demanded that you bless him and you changed his name from Jacob meaning grabber to Israel meaning wrestler (Gen. 32:28). Jacob named the place Peniel (face of God), saying I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.

Baked into the name Israel is this very idea of a divinely initiated wrestling match. And this name, "you have wrestled with God," was not one that I or my descendants, the people of Israel, chose for themselves but one God bestowed on us...as a blessing. Perhaps wrestling with God is God-initiated and a blessing. Why is it a blessing? Because we never come out of that wrestling match as we entered it. Wrestling with God may leave us limping but it transforms our understanding of who God is. We see God better after the struggle.

When our descendants took the name Israel and ran with it, they saw in their obscure name a phrase that sounded like the combination of two Hebrew words: yisra (wrestling) and el (God). Whatever their name's obscure origins, my descendants chose to understand it as a description of the type of relationship they had with their

God - a relationship marked by God-initiated struggling. Our descendants didn't have the slightest intention of hiding our wrestling with God, and not simply here but struggling with God marks the whole biblical story of Israel from beginning to end. Sometimes their struggles were their own fault for refusing to follow God's ways - like Adam and Eve getting kicked out of the Garden of Eden. Other times, however, the struggle was due to no fault of their own. They were simply puzzled, panicked or perturbed about God acting out of character with no explanation. We see this in the book of Psalms, where, for example a psalmist is lamenting why God is so oblivious to the unjust suffering of the righteous while God lets the wicked go unpunished. (Curveball, Peter Enns, p. 39-10)

We're supposed to be your chosen family but what a mess we are - more like a family bush than a family tree - more like a burning bush of cheating and jealousy and rage. God, our relationship with you is an ongoing wrestling match and it has been so for your people from the get-go; wrestling not only with you but with each other. There has to be an easier way but you are our God, the Lord of Life, Creator of Heaven and Earth and the God who sees and hears us as individuals and shows us your face and your steadfast love from generation to generation. May it always be so. Amen.

Sermon Reflection:

1. Rachel is the third generation to struggle with fertility and to call on God about it but to also use other means to get what she wants. The women in today's story are both given voice and agency in a patriarchal society. What are the scripture writers trying to tell us by this generational repetition?

2. Genesis is the story of pre-organized religion where individuals call on God and make altars and sacred places wherever they encounter God. There also appears to be some mixing of religions with "The Living One Who Sees and Hears" and household idols (probably fertility gods), mandrakes, divining rods for mating animals. At this point, there doesn't seem to be judgement about that but after the Exodus, God will want sole loyalty, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

3. Struggling with God and others marks the whole biblical story from beginning to end. What does struggling with God do for us? How does our struggles with others show us God's face? How does this reality of struggle challenge the notion that "if we just believe in God, everything will be perfect?"