



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE REV. CANON NANCY ROSS, CANON FOR CATHEDRAL RELATIONS  
THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 12, JULY 26, 2020  
GENESIS 29:15-28; PSALM 15<sup>1</sup>-11, 45b; MATTHEW 13:31-33, 44-52

## WHAT IS GOD UP TO?

**Genesis 29:15-28** *[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. (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) 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.]*

*What is God up to?* That is humanity’s question in every age.

Here we are, another week reading in the lectionary of the continuing saga from Genesis. And it’s not the glorious stuff of the Spirit of God hovering over the waters, and “Let there be light.” On no, that was 29 long, eventful chapters ago.

We’re following the story of Abraham, and his son Isaac, and now Abraham’s grandson

Jacob, with Leah and Rachel. Have any of their stories been satisfying, on the bald-faced narrative level? Abraham, asked to, and ready to, sacrifice his son Isaac; Isaac and Rebekah, terrible parents, actually, playing opposite favorites with their twin boys Esau and Jacob; then Jacob, stealing first-born-brother Esau’s inheritance birthright by subterfuge.

Oy. But this is the BIBLE. Our HOLY book. It’s sacred reading. But, then, hmm...Why are *these* folks our folks? *What is God up to?*

Well, are there any stories of not-so-greatness in your personal family line? Or let me put this a different way: are there beloved, even spectacular people in your family line, about whom there might be... a sketchy story or two?

My son Patrick, who's been gone over a decade, was bigger than life in every way. A big six-foot-one boy with big, size 13½ stinky feet; a big, loud voice; a big, boisterous personality; a big, colorful mohawk and tattoos; a big, tender heart that loved extravagantly. He did some true wonders in his brief 22 years: he brought his homeless friends home to sleep on our couch; he saved a younger, drunk buddy from getting beat up in a mosh pit at a punk concert in San Francisco; he chronicled our family's foibles in devastating cartoons – and he drew cartoon characters for kids at the hospital to color. He made us laugh through our tears time and again. I learned so much from my boy's voracious life and wide embrace.

And... this boy shoplifted a CHAINSAW from Home Depot. A chainsaw, of all things, people! The fact that it was for the zombie apocalypse, which is kind of cute, does not diminish that that's **not** a thing that makes a Momma proud. I didn't know, at the time; he kept it at someone else's house for like two years. But I can tell you this: the chainsaw

thing is not the only *sketchy* story from Patrick's life.

But I'm telling you, ALL of Patrick's story is full of grace. And we still tell his story, including the sketchy parts, and experience grace.

Isn't that what the Bible does? Pondering today's reading from the Hebrew scripture, about Jacob getting the switcheroo of the not-chosen Leah instead of the glorious Rachel, I could start by feeling bad for Jacob, who is deceived, and has to work another seven years. That's not right! Where's the grace? But then again, that's what Jacob did to Isaac, his Dad – a clandestine switch in the dark – to get the birthright that Isaac thought he was giving to Esau.

Story after story of not-so-greatness....

Yet, if you believe there is revelation for us in Scripture, then God gives us *these* people, *these* situations – as our progenitors and metaphors and morality tales. Maybe it's not IN SPITE OF their not being perfect. Maybe it's BECAUSE they're not perfect. Because we're not perfect, either. But our forebears show us how grace is everywhere. Imperfection does not prevent God's care, does not prevent the movement of the Spirit in our lives and in the world.

Because this *is* life. These stories in Genesis are messy; the patriarchal culture of inheritance and chattel women and slavery is ugly to us. We look at them with a jaundiced eye. But how're our eyes looking at our own culture today, built on slavery and racism and the idol of consumerism? It's still messy. And it's still not right.

Life doesn't tend to give us what we are expecting, or what we think we want or deserve. People will talk about "waking up with Leah." We think the story is going to be about Jacob working hard to get his reward – an obvious moral of a story – and, whoops! surprise! when the sun comes up, the bride's not Rachel, it's Leah. But what about "waking up with Jacob?" We could talk all day about Leah's story, too, because for Leah's plight in this, she wakes up with a husband who doesn't ever love her. In the BIBLE! *What is God up to?*

Well, Jacob is going to physically wrestle with God as this story progresses, demanding God's blessing – the blessing God is there to give him. Leah, the unloved wife, is going to be blest with the first son, and then five more sons and a daughter, and she names her first three boys beseeching her husband's elusive love, but, finally, names the fourth, Judah, "Praise." Leaning into the blessing. It took

some time, for both. But the blessing overcomes them, both.

*I think THAT's what God is up to* in today's readings. Of course there are more layers and layers of meaning here that we can uncover and chew on. *That's what God is up to, too.* But I'm feeling on this day, how flawed people *experience* grace when they recognize the grace that is already there. Flawed people are part of the history of God's action among us. Flawed people are Jesus's ancestors. Flawed people, in messed up situations, are Jesus' hands and feet in the world today.

And THAT is good news, indeed. Because no one among us is un-flawed. Not in our family tree, not in our own lives. *So what is God up to?* God is up to loving us anyway! And working with and through us anyway! So we have work to do!

Now, just how great a figure do you have to be to shine God's light in the world? In some of our prayers, we name the "patriarchs" and "matriarchs." Well, that's sketchy JACOB. That's Leah and Rachel. And who is living out God's story in the world today? YOU ARE, and I am, and the people we disagree with are.

This is not a *new* message. But I think we really need to feel it in our hearts today. In this season, during the peaceful protests and violent rioting going on in our city, so much feels wrong, and frightening, and necessary,

and fraught – and it has exacerbated the sense of division among us. But God is still here, and we've got God's work to do. And God's work is about CHANGE.

In today's Gospel, Jesus talks in parables about how tiny things become verdant, life-giving branches, become enough bread for a throng of people. How finding the one thing of greatest value matters. All of that is about the inbreaking kingdom, where the oppressed are lifted up – and all of that is about our **own** faith journeys, too, and our actions in the world as Jesus' followers. Do you have to be glorious to be caught up in God's grace? Not if you read the stories in Genesis. Yet you ARE glorious, BECAUSE you are already caught up in God's grace. Just recognize it and live into it and hold onto it, with your mustard seed of faith.

Our ancient and ongoing history, and our own personal story, is the story of how a flawed people discover and experience and grow into their relationship with the Divine who already loves them. What is your own story of relationship with the Divine? And how are you going to live out that story in right action?

My son Patrick wrote a poem in his journal that says:

*I don't need my life to be an  
Easter Island, no Aurora borealis,  
no Everest peak, no Stonehenge.  
I just want my existence to brighten  
as many other people's journeys as I can...  
As large as being a son,  
and as small as a doodle a nurse delivered  
from a stranger down the hall,  
that one can smile from surprise  
and tape it to her wall  
For a weeklong visit  
in a children's hospital  
when you were six years old.*

I think that is glorious. And it changes the world.

We are surrounded by grace, and are sharers of that ancient and ever-present blessing, even if, on a bad day, we once lifted a chainsaw. Flawed as we may be, at this time, in this place, with these problems, we are the agents of change, and we are beloved – and we are living into our own conversation and relationship with the Divine.

***That*** is what God is up to. With you.