

Sermon – September 29, 2019  
The Rev. John C. Wright

Fulfillment  
Text: Genesis 29:21-35 and Genesis 49:29-33

To the Glory of God, Soli Deo Gloria

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and enter the sharing of these words, make them to be a blessing for Your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labors as we tarry here. Amen

I like to read and study the Old Testament. It is full of treasures found in the story of God and His love for His people. It is a story told through people, imperfect people, who are like us. If you have never read through the Old Testament, make plans to do so soon - you will be blessed. This morning's reading is a part of the story of Jacob. A story that most of us have heard or read. We might remember that Jacob was the younger son and had conflict with Esau his older brother, the first born. And I am sure that many of us have heard the stories of how Jacob tricked Esau out of his birthright and Isaac out of the blessing for the first born. We remember the goat skins placed upon arms, savory food prepared, lies told, and a stolen blessing given. We remember the rage of Esau when he learns of his younger brother's actions, and we remember Jacob being sent away to live with his uncle Laban so that his brother would not kill him. This is a great story and there are many truths and treasures God gives in that part of His people's story, but this morning we are looking at another passage, another part of the story of God's people. When we read the Old Testament, say with me "when" (yes, we need to read this Testament!), it has been my experience that often I will be reading a passage and what is occurring just seems a little bit odd, the action described stands out, and I find myself asking why is that part of the

story included? I am learning when I see these odd sections that I need to stop and dig into them a bit and see what God is telling us in those scriptures. This morning's reading is one of those texts in the Old Testament. I have read it many times and have always wondered why God included the naming of the sons of Jacob in the story, however, I never stopped and dug in and looked at this text. During a class in seminary, one of my professors pointed out the treasure in this text, and this morning I would like to share that treasure with you.

Let me give you the backstory just to catch everyone up. Jacob, after fleeing from Esau, has arrived in Padanaram and is living and working for his uncle Laban. After a month of letting Jacob work, Laban, his uncle, has approached Jacob and requested for him to name his wages. We don't know why Laban does this, but he does. Over this month of time that Jacob has been living with Laban, he has worked for free and he has met Laban's daughters. The older, the first born is Leah. She is the one with the beautiful eyes. And then there is Rachel, the younger, the second born daughter, who is described as beautiful in appearance. Jacob has fallen in love with Rachel. When Jacob names his wages, he tells Laban he will work for seven years for Rachel's hand. Ten shekels a year is the standard wage for a shepherd. The typical bride price found in Middle East texts from this period is thirty to forty shekels. By agreeing to work seven years Jacob is agreeing to pay a premium for Rachel's hand. She is a nine-cow wife. You all do know what a nine-cow wife is, don't you? If you don't, I will have to tell you that story one day!

Notice in the text that Laban does not mention Rachel's name when he agrees to the negotiated price. The lack of a bride's name is a bit of foreshadowing of something to come. What happens next might be another part of Jacob's story that is familiar to us. Jacob counts down the days for the seven years and they fly by because he is in love. Finally, the day arrives and he goes to Laban and demands his wages. Laban agrees and calls family and friends together for a feast.

There is no wedding ceremony or priest to marry the couple, just a feast that lasts for a week. On the first night of this feast, the couple spends their first night together as husband and wife. The feast will continue for a week as the couple are now considered husband and wife. We don't really know all the details, but somehow in the morning when Jacob wakes up and his eyes focus on his new wife, it is Leah! The first night for a couple was often spent in the tent of the bride's mother and father. If that is the case, Jacob did not have to go far to find Laban. Jacob, himself a trickster, has been tricked and he is furious. He has a discussion with Laban, and all that Laban tells him is that in this country the younger daughter is not given in marriage before the elder, but if Jacob will stay with Leah for the week and become her husband, for another seven years of labor, he may have Rachel as his wife also at the end of the week. Laban is a master negotiator. Jacob agrees to the contract. I am not sure why he does not negotiate a new bride price for Rachel, but he doesn't, and a week later he is given Rachel as his wife also. In the course of two weeks, Jacob goes from a single man to a man with two wives. The scripture tells us that Jacob, "loved Rachel more than Leah." This favoritism issue in the descendants of Abraham continues even to this day, but that is a whole different treasure that we can mine on another day.

Now the story of Jacob does not give us details of what happens in the tents of Jacob, but at this point God enters the story. It has been a while in the Old Testament since we have heard from God, but at this time, with one of his children unloved, God enters the story and acts. Leah conceives and Rachel is barren. This is the point where we need to start paying attention. As God interacts with His people, as God enters their story - His story, our story - here we find treasure. Let's look at the text. In verse 32 we find, "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." Leah has given Jacob a child, a firstborn son and she thinks that now her husband

will love her. Can you catch the pain and desire she has, the brokenness in her heart as she hopes for the love of her husband? The name she chooses for her son (notice that she is the one naming the son and not Jacob) is Reuben. The name “Reuben” in Hebrew means, “See, a son!” There is no indication that as a result of this birth she is loved. Jacob is not changed by the birth of his son. The LORD continues to look favorably upon Leah, and she conceives again. Notice how the strength of her pain has grown as seen in her comment when this son is born and she names him Simeon, saying, “Because the LORD has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also.” Do you hear her cry of pain? She says she is hated! Can we feel her pain from the lack of love from her husband, Jacob? Can we catch her pain across the centuries? Can we catch the brokenness in her cry? God has heard her cry and has given her a son and she names him Simeon (again Jacob does not do the naming). The name “Simeon”, in Hebrew, is connected with the verb “has heard” (Heb. šāma’). Notice that Leah is beginning to focus on God, He has heard her cry out to Him for love and has given her a son and she names him “has heard.” But there is no indication that Jacob’s heart has turned at all to Leah.

God is not done yet! Leah conceives yet again! Hear her cry for love and the hope she has that finally she will find love from her husband with this third son. She has been such a blessing to Jacob’s family. She has given Jacob, with the Lord’s help, three sons. Surely now he will be joined to this woman with the beautiful eyes. She names this son Levi. Listen to the text: Leah says, “Now this time my husband will be joined to me, because I have borne him three sons; therefore, he was named Levi.” His Hebrew name is connected to the word for attachment. Leah is hoping for attachment; every time this son’s name is mentioned, Jacob will hear Leah’s desire for attachment to him. Do we ever weep when we read God’s word? Can we share in the brokenness that Leah has? Can we catch her pain? What is God doing? Why doesn’t He just

change Jacob so that he loves Leah? Why doesn't God fix this mess? Is He sovereign? Why does He let Leah cry out and not answer her cry? But God is not done yet. Look at what happens next. "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." Did you catch what Leah did? This is one of those texts in our Bibles that we should underline, highlight, put a sticky note on, or mark somehow so that we can find it again because we will need it. This time Leah is not looking to Jacob, she simply chooses to praise the LORD. She names her son Judah. The Hebrew meaning is "may God be praised." This is Judah, the child who Leah, in the midst of her pain, praised God for. In her brokenness, she praised God. This is the child from whom King David will descend. This is the child that leads to Jesus who changes everything! The treasure here for us to discover is the praise of God in our pain. We are to praise God in the storm. It is what Leah does with the birth of her fourth child, Judah, when she chooses to shift her focus from her pain and lack of love from her husband to a focus on God, and in doing so, she praises Him. Notice in the text there is no indication that Jacob's heart is changed. Leah's heart is changed, however. Her heart is turned to the Lord and she praises God for her fourth son, Judah. This is one of the treasures for us in the text - not who this child is or who will come from his tribe, (even though that is important!), but the treasure for us this day is the change in Leah from one seeking a solution to her pain in Jacob to turning her heart to God in the depths of her pain and praising Him. Leah has been seeking fulfilment from Jacob, fulfilment from a human, and she has found only pain. When she turns to the LORD and praises Him, she finds fulfilment. She is filled with praise for a loving God.

Let's look at this idea for our own lives today. Let's look at what happens if we, like Leah, choose to praise God in the midst of our pain. The first thing that happens, if we praise God in

the storm, is God is enthroned in our situation. Let me state that again, the first thing that happens if we praise God in our pain is it enthrones God in our situation. We can find this in David's psalms. In Psalm 22:3 David writes, "Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel." In the Japanese translation of this verse it says, "When God's people praise Him, He brings a big chair and sits there." Don't you like that picture? When we start praising God, He comes and pulls up a big chair and sits down in the midst of our situation. Our praise makes a place for God's power to descend upon us. Through our praise, God is able to come and be in the middle of our situation. His rule is now present, and He can overrule all that is occurring around us. Think about that, when we praise God, God is able to come and bring His rule to our situation. Wow! Isn't that what we want?

The next aspect of giving God praise in the storm is understanding that this type of praise is a form of surrender or relinquishment. We simply begin to focus on God and not on ourselves. E. Stanley Jones, the great missionary to India, said, "Whatever gets your attention, gets you." When we move our focus from our pain, our issues, and our problems, and turn our praise to God, we move our focus from telling God how big and ugly and terrible and painful our problem is to telling our problem how big and awesome and powerful and loving is our God. This God who has come and sat down with us is an awesome God; and when we focus on Him, the scope of our problem changes. This focus on God through praise makes us shift our center from ourselves to God. Once we have made this shift, our problem is radically redefined, not in context of our capabilities, but in the context of God's power and might. This is the change that Leah makes in moving her focus from her situation and struggle with a desire for fulfillment from her husband to praising God. She is able to finally praise God for the child and when she does, God's blessings flow to her and to us.

This is not an easy change for us to make. We can see Leah's struggle with this as her brokenness grows with each newly born child and the dashing of her hope again and again. Unlike Leah, we live in New Testament times. We have been given a more complete revelation of God through Jesus, the Lion of Judah. We know that Jesus has promised that He will never leave us and He will be present with us always. This is one of Jesus' many promises to us. This promise to be with us is no less in the storms of life. During the recent conference Kay and I attended, one of the praise songs we sang (see note below) addressed this idea of our praise to God in the storm. And for me, a couple of lines of that song capture this idea effectively. Let me share them with you. The first line is "There'll be another in the fire standing next to me." When we are in the fire, in the very heat of our pain, we can rest assured that Jesus is there with us, suffering with us, close by. The second line in the song spoke even more clearly of this idea to me. It is "Count the joy come every battle 'cause I know that's where You'll be." When we are in the midst of trials, it is in that moment that Jesus is the closest. When the battle rages, He comes and is with us. The darker the moment, the closer Jesus is, so count the joy come every battle, 'cause we know that Jesus is close by.

Before we close our treasure hunt this morning, there is one last nugget in Leah's story that we need to unearth. I will not take time to tell the rest of Jacob's story; let it suffice to say that he wrestles with God and God works on Jacob, and when God works on us, we are changed. In fact, God changes Jacob's name to Israel. To find this last nugget, let me take us to the end of Jacob's life in Egypt where just before he dies, he gives his sons final directions. Listen as I read Genesis 49: 29-33. "Then he charged them, saying to them, 'I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my ancestors— in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave in the field at Machpelah, near Mamre, in the land of Canaan, in the field that Abraham bought

from Ephron the Hittite as a burial site. There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried; there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried; and there I buried Leah—the field and the cave that is in it were purchased from the Hittites.’ When Jacob ended his charge to his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed, breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.”

Did you catch what Jacob said in his final instructions? He told them to take his body back to the land of Canaan, the promised land and to bury his body in the cave where Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried, where Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried and where he, Jacob, had buried Leah. Jacob’s final request was to be buried with his wife Leah, to have his bones spend eternity there with hers among the patriarchs of Israel. Rachel is buried close to Bethlehem, but Jacob’s final request is to be buried with Leah. When we wrestle with God, when we change our focus and praise God as Leah did in the midst of the storm, God comes and changes the situation. The way I read this last instruction of Genesis is that Jacob had at some point come to love Leah. He loved her enough to take her body to the family burial plot, and his final instruction was a charge to his sons to make sure that he was buried there with her. I think at some point in Jacob’s story, his heart was turned to Leah and she found not only fulfillment in her LORD, but the fulfillment that was the desire of her heart, the love of her husband. Praise in the storm changes us and allows God to work. In the words of the song, “Count the joy come every battle, ‘cause I know that’s where You’ll be.”

Pray with me. Come Holy Spirit and awaken us to praise you in the storm. Teach us to lift our voices in praise in the darkest moments of life. Give us a heart of praise for the LORD and help us to find the joy that comes when we realize that you are closest when the battles of life overtake us. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Hear us as we praise You in the storm. Change us to lean upon You in the storm. Amen

**“The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Go forth into Jesus’ mission.”**

Note: “Another in the Fire” by Hillsong United - March 2019