

Genesis 31: 14-35 “Good Secret Keepers” Rev. Janet Chapman 10/12/25

Did we really just hear that text right? My guess is that you may have never heard such a thing out of the Bible. Every once in awhile, I’m drawn to the totally bizarre biblical stories, kind of like walking into Ripley’s Believe-it-or-not. This story is straight from the Bible’s Believe-it-or-not collection where we find such things as the Israelite priests and all their descendants being required to wear long underwear; where we meet Samson on steroids who caught 300 foxes and tied them tail to tail in pairs and then fastened a torch to every pair of tails. He then lit those torches and let the foxes loose (PETA would have a hey-day with that one). Then there is the story of all the gold jewelry being collected from the Israelites in the wilderness and thrown into the fire; suddenly it just forms into a golden calf, without anyone touching it. Then there is the story from Acts where Paul literally bores someone to death who was sitting in a windowsill, falls asleep because Paul “spoke on and on,” and proceeds to fall 3 floors to his death. Folks, you can’t make this stuff up!

Today’s story from the Bible’s Believe-it-or-not collection is steeped with jealousy, betrayal, secrecy, manipulation, romantic love, feminism, and family dysfunction to the max. God loves a good story and we as humans, are story-telling animals. We understand ourselves and each other within narrative frameworks that are shaped by the stories we tell. Jesus understood this, of course, which explains why he delivered his message of love and redemption through parables and stories instead of doctrines and dogmas. The Bible is filled with stories of how different generations of people understood their relationship to God and others. Nadia Bolz-Weber writes that we are storytelling creatures because we are fashioned in the image of a storytelling God. We should never neglect that gift nor lose our love for telling the story.

Listen to this story. Jacob has fled from home after stealing the birthright of his brother Esau and finds solace at his Uncle Laban’s home. Jacob, the trickster, gets a job shepherding and while doing so, falls in love with Laban’s youngest daughter, Rachel. At that time, cousin to cousin relationships were common. Jacob will be

allowed to marry Rachel if he works seven years for his uncle, which he does, but on the wedding night, the family tricks Jacob because, as we know, what goes around comes around. The older daughter Leah was supposed to marry Jacob's brother Esau, but according to the Rabbis in the midrash, neither Laban, Leah nor sister Rachel want that for her, so they conspire to get a veiled Leah into Jacob's marriage bed instead. We see here that both Leah and Rachel learn how to be good secret keepers early on in the family drama. Jacob doesn't figure it out until the next morning and he is ticked off. Laban explains it away by saying the oldest daughter must be married first so if Jacob wants Rachel, now he has to work another 7 years which he does, because he is stupid in love. To be married to two sisters simultaneously is seldom recommended even under the best of circumstances, and in this case it becomes a disaster. Leah has no problem becoming pregnant Rachel is barren. She grows jealous and blames Jacob, and in turn, Jacob blames God. It does appear that Jacob feels bad for Rachel and seeks to support her in her sorrow. This support may have given Rachel the ability to think outside the box to ease her pain. She decides to turn over her handmaid to be with Jacob and then takes custody of the two children the handmaid gives birth to. But then with the score at 4 kids to 2 kids, and Leah being ahead in the child-bearing arena, a heated rivalry begins. It's kind of like that old Rodney Dangerfield line, "I went to a fight the other night, and a hockey game broke out." Leah puts her handmaid into the game and soon the score is 6-2. There aren't any screaming crowds, but the winning team is getting quite smug. Then Rachel gives birth to Joseph and Benjamin. But ultimately, the score ends at 9-4, counting Leah's baby girl Dinah, and we end up with the 12 sons of Jacob, and subsequently the 12 tribes of Israel. Meanwhile, Jacob has been busy trying to out-cheat his crooked father-in-law Uncle Laban which causes the whole family dynamic to explode.

Interestingly, this story horrified modern novelist Margaret Atwood so much that she was inspired to write a book called "The Handmaid's Tale." In it, one of the most beautiful, intimate parts of human existence becomes a hideous duty performed strictly in the interest of generating an heir, completely stripped of any semblance of

love. It would be easy to conclude that Atwood's book was simply an indictment against the religious practices seen in Rachel and Leah's story but, according to the author, it is more about the need for progressive movements which protect vulnerable groups, including women, against all injustices. Additionally, it is about both the men and the women who go against the grain and seek to right the wrongs of their society.

In today's story, both Rachel and Leah have been pawns in their father's schemes and are placed in competition with each other. However, when Jacob prepares to leave Laban's property, they speak with one voice agreeing it is time to leave their father's home. They tell Jacob to do whatever God has said for they have a common enemy now, their father, who has treated them poorly. They use legal language to describe what their father has done, saying that he has sold them, treated them like foreigners, and wasted all their money. Nowhere else in Hebrew scripture is a proper marriage described as a father selling his daughters. Even in a system where women are routinely treated as objects, Laban has gone too far! With their keen intellect, they realized all the wealth that had been taken from their father should no belong to them and their children. This is radical stuff for normally it is only the men who inherit anything, but the two sisters are angry at being treated as wages for Jacob's tireless work for their father. If we didn't know better, we might see these two as early feminists. But that is silenced when Laban catches up to the family and the men show how the women are still viewed as just objects. Laban says that Jacob has carried away his daughters like captives of the sword, more like the spoils of war, than cherished family members. Then Jacob responds, "I fled in secret because I was afraid, for I thought you would take your daughters from me by force." Like Laban, Jacob sees his wives as objects that can be taken away rather than people with their own thoughts, feelings, and autonomy. Then Laban reveals what I think is his real beef, "Why did you steal my household gods?" These were figurines probably made of semi-precious metals handed down over generations among family members. In a shocking and bold move, we are told that Rachel swiped the figurines in secret. But Jacob denies anyone of his household took them and if they did, they would die by his

own hand. Again, the power of secrecy becomes a dangerous character in this drama. The love of Jacob's life could now lose her life because of his own words. So Laban goes looking for his gods and when he gets to Rachel's tent, she has hid them under a saddle and is sitting on them. She tells him she can't get up because she is on her period. With this, she very cleverly uses the man's own patriarchy against him. No man would be caught dead coming near a woman on her period in that day and age, it was the one time a woman was assured of her privacy. The valuable gods remain undetected and having been warned in a dream by God, Laban leaves Jacob and his household alone

Jewish tradition has given Rachel the title of a "good secret keeper" which may be a nice way of calling her a "liar," but I prefer that she simply knew when to keep quiet and when to speak out. She reclaimed some of what had been stolen and made right some wrongs in her life. She ensured her sister had a husband who wouldn't physically harm her and sought to be in charge of her own destiny. Before losing her life in childbirth, she chose the name Benoni for her newborn, which means Son of Sorrow. Jacob changed it to Benjamin which means Son of Old Age. Centuries later, when the Babylonians carried the Israelites off into exile, it was Jeremiah the prophet who said that even in her tomb, Rachel was grieving still. He writes, "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children." When I think of Rachel, I will think of those who have anguished long years to give birth and those who have been made to endure pregnancies which were not their choice. I will think of those who stand up for each other, of those who seek to right the wrongs of society, and protect the most vulnerable. I will remember that even in the most patriarchal societies, women can find ways to embrace their power and men can find ways to support and encourage those in sorrow. Most importantly, I will remember that God loves to tell stories and even with the most bizarre, God's point always rings true, from Romans 8:28 - "We know that God works all things together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose." That makes a great story!