

July 27, 2008
The Worst Possible Start
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(Genesis 29:15-30 NRSV) Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" {16} Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. {17} Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. {18} Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." {19} Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." {20} So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. {21} Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." {22} So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. {23} But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. {24} (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) {25} 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?" {26} Laban said, "This is not done in our country--giving the younger before the firstborn. {27} Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." {28} Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife. {29} (Laban gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her maid.) {30} So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for another seven years.

Once again our story jumps ahead and we need to back up to really understand what is going on.

Last week we ended with Jacob encountering God.

--- God renewed the promises that he made with Jacob
The promises that he had given to Abraham and Isaac

Jacob comes to a well --- once again a local watering spot proves to be a popular meeting spot.

Some shepherds are hanging out at the well waiting there for their partners to come because it appears that this is a co-operative well.

And the rules of the co-op said that they had to wait until every one of the

members was there before they could drink. (It seems that a large rock covered the opening --- some scholars suggest that this rock was so large that the only way that it could be moved was by all of the members working together.

While waiting for the other members of the co-op --- Jacob finds out that not only do these shepherds know Laban and that he is a member of the co-op, but that – surprise – surprise – here comes his daughter Rachel with her father’s sheep.

It was love at first sight for Jacob!

He was so smitten by her, that he broke the rules and goes and pulls off the rock and waters her sheep even though not all the partners are there! Rachel, we are told was a very beautiful woman –but whether it was her beauty or her father fine looking herd of sheep that caught Jacob’s eye – we will never know!

Rachel, we are told, runs to tell her father – so Jacob ends up staying with his mother’s brother Laban for the next month.

And once again, it is a crazy story -- -- -- but another typical story about Abraham’s dysfunctional offspring

This story at one level is every man’s fantasy – the desire to have more than one wife (at the same time . . .)

HBO has a new series that explores what this is all about. It is called BIG LOVE and we can gain some insights into this lifestyle from this series.

The show is set in Salt Lake City and follows the life of Bill Hendrickson, a modern-day polygamist who has three wives and seven children. The funny thing is, is that anyone who might think that this lifestyle sounds appealing would probably have a new view after watching this show.

Bill’s three wives are:

BARB – the woman he married first, and the mother of his two oldest children. She seems to be the most level headed – but even her role as the level headed one begins to wear thin after a while.

NICKI is Bill’s second wife and she is a spender! She is always throwing the family budget into a tizzy. Nicki also brings to the relationship some major issues from her childhood growing up in a polygamist family run by her father Roman. Roman’s group is an offshoot of the Mormon Church since the Mormon ended the practice of polygamy over a century ago. Roman believes

that his group is THE MORMON CHURCH! Roman has a religious and nasty demeanor and he can be downright devious. His latest wife (in addition to the several that he already has) is a young teenage girl. Roman makes Bill's life very difficult – and at times it seems maybe even dangerous.

MARGENE, is Bill's youngest wife. She is also the most un-inhibited – which creates all kinds of problems to this troubled family system.

As you watch each of these “sister-wives” as they like to call themselves you quickly realize that they each have their own very different personalities, dreams and expectations of the family as well. This creates all kinds of conflict – jealousy, sniping and all kinds of other problems -> Roman doesn't help matters either.

What is interesting about the show is the realization that each wife has her own house – side by side on the same street – and the family members roam freely from one house to the next.

Each wife has her own car – as does Bill.

Bill is the owner of a chain of home supply stores – but, as you can imagine, the task of keeping all of this real estate, as well as all the normal costs of a family of 11 is enormous! Bill is constantly fretting about money!

The family tries to pretend that they are a part of mainstream America. While most polygamists live in compounds, somewhat out of the public eye, the Hendrickson family live in the suburbs of Salt Lake City. They do try to keep a low profile, by trying to pass off two of the wives as single mothers that Bill is just trying to help doesn't always work. The teenage children find this arraignment particularly difficult.

Jacob, just like Bill Hendrickson in BIG LOVE, got himself four wives and a heap of trouble. Jacob also was blessed with a devious father-in-law.

Jacob, the trickster, is in Haran because he has tricked his brother out of his birthright, and conned his father Isaac to give his personal blessing to him – rather than Esau who it was supposed to go to.

After falling madly (blindly?) in love with Rachel – Jacob offers to work seven years for Laban as payment for the brides price.

Then the trickster gets tricked. At the end of the seven years Laban throws a grand wedding feast. Jacob, we can only imagine, drank a little too much wine, because when he wakes up the next morning following the consummation of

the marriage he finds in his wedding bed not beautiful Rachel, but instead he finds her “weak eyed” older sister Leah. Now I am not going to waste any time with the etymology of the name Leah – which has its roots as the same word for cow!

But it is safe to say – Jacob was more than a little surprised when he woke up and found Leah.

You know, people who love to trick others --- usually do not like to have tricks played on them —> but it is safe to say that Laban pulled a doozy on Jacob.

When Jacob confronts Laban, he brushes off his deception by saying:
 “This is not done in our country-- giving the younger before the firstborn.”

Kinda makes you want to shout out loud – “It’s about time!”

Even though Laban pulls the fast one on Jacob, he does say to him:
 Genesis 29:27 (NLT) “Wait until the bridal week is over, and you can have Rachel, too-- that is, if you promise to work another seven years for me.”

All of a sudden, Jacob has 4 wives: Leah and her maid Zilpah, along with Rachel and her maid Bilhah. They all become partners for Jacob.

While Bill Hendrickson on BIG LOVE seems to really love all three of his wives, the Biblical story tells us quite clearly that Jacob loves Rachel but not Leah.

But can you really blame him?
 He never intended to marry Leah —> he was tricked into it.

As I mentioned earlier, the text even hints that there may have been something unattractive about Leah.

¹⁷ Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful.

If you read the Hebrew carefully it seems to say something like:
 Rachel was a hottie
 Leah has lovely eyes, too bad they are set in such an ugly face!

Regardless, Leah is Jacob’s wife.
 While we might be able to understand why he might not have felt tenderness toward her, he apparently let his lack of affection toward her show —> and it becomes a constant source of tension in the family, as the next few chapters will demonstrate.

In Chapter 30, when Rachel's maid has a son, Rachel names the child: Naphtali, which in Hebrew means "my struggle". She says:

Genesis 30:8 (NIV) "I have had an intense struggle with my sister, and I am winning!"

Not a really happy sounding family.

Now do you remember who Jacob's family is?

Jacob had 12 sons born to his four wives:

LEAH	Zilpah - Maid	RACHEL	Bilhah - Maid
Reuben	Gad	Joseph	Dan
Simeon	Asher	Benjamin	Naphtali
Levi			
Judah			
Issachar			
Zebulun			

Isn't it fascinating - that here in the very first book of our Bible that we find the story of an extremely dysfunctional family - Yet it is a family that makes a huge impact for God.

One of the lessons that this story can teach us is that despite whatever circumstances we grow up in → we can still make an impact for God!

Jennifer Velez understands.

Jennifer Velez is the commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Human Services - this is the agency responsible for overseeing the Welfare Department of the state. Her clientele includes about a million people who either live in poverty or have some form of disability.

Every day, Human Services faces a difficult challenge.

Always faced with tight budgets

Forced to go to bat for the homeless and the handicapped often against powerful interest groups → including insurance companies, drug makers, and the state legislature

Many people look at a job like Velez's and see it as a jumping pad to a higher profile and more lucrative opportunity → but not Velez - she says that her dream job would be working for a local food bank.

What is interesting about Velez is that she is basically a kid from the wrong side of the tracks - a lot like many of the people that we were working with this week.

Her mother had been a foster child and the victim of domestic abuse.
Her mom married but when Velez was 2 years old her parents divorced
Velez - her mom - and her older sister had to go on public assistance for
a couple of years until her mom eventually remarried
But financially things were not much better
Her step dad was a day laborer who didn't make much money.

Making ends meet was a constant struggle
And the places they lived were often far from ideal

Eventually Velez went to college - working multiple jobs and taking out loans to pay her way.

She managed to pull herself up out of the environment that she grew up in - but she never forgot it!

Today she is married to a marketing executive, has two children and as I shared earlier a very important job.

She works with the compassion of someone who knows what it is like to come from the wrong side of the tracks.

Kevin Ryan, the man Velez replaced says about her:

I think Jen, when she closes her eyes at night, remembers vividly the school girl living in a trailer park immersed in the disenfranchisement of poverty. I think she recalls that experience, it is both suffocating and liberating - -- suffocating in the sense that she has a very real sense of all the limitations that poverty forces on you, and liberating in the sense that it's a compass, if you will, about how to better serve the next generation of kids whose families are living below the poverty line. That is her life's work.

I hope that ten years from now I can tell you a story about Derek or Bobby Jo, or some other child that ASP has helped bring hope to.

Beginnings can often be ragged and difficult, and have long lasting impact —> but they do not have to define us or doom us!

The great thing about this story is that it reminds us just of that.

Despite Jacob's messed up life
Filled with treachery, dishonesty and deception

Jacob's messed up life will be the one through whom the Covenant lives.

So now it is our turn, to take responsibility of who we are.

But we need to remember —> we can use where we have been to make us better, more compassionate people in the future.