

“Stories of Jacob: Behind the Scenes”

Date: 20 August 2017

Text: Genesis 30: 25-43

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still have the consequence that God hopes will happen through it, even if it takes a soap opera to make it unfold eventually. But what if a congregation becomes aware of the nudge? What if a congregation discerns how God would have them live in new ways? When a congregation discerns the nudge of God and responds, then two things happen. It proves itself faithful (responding to the nudge of God), and it will become more effective (working with God’s nudge). Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, said that we are God’s co-workers. God wants us as partners in the pursuit of God’s mission in the world. And if we believe that God occasionally nudges us then the nudge indicates the shape of the partnership God wants from us and the direction God would have us go.

So how do we figure out if God is nudging us as a church? As these stories of Rachel, Jacob and Leah illustrate, nudges are not obvious. It is through a spiritual practice called discernment that we glimpse them. There’s a traditional phrase—“the three lights”—that refers to three things to reflect on... that shine light on one’s situation and illumines a path God might be encouraging a congregation to pursue. The first is scripture. The church has always believed that God’s will, generally, is found in its words. The second is your circumstances. What is the congregation’s current context? What is happening around the congregation right now? A congregation’s context is its place of ministry and mission. The abilities of congregants (also part of the context) are the tools for ministry and mission. The third light is the inward prompting of the Holy Spirit. Is the congregation feeling moved by God to embark on a new venture? Knowing this takes prayer.

I’ll be encouraging us as Varsity Acres Church to reflect on the three lights in the months to come. Why? Well, using the three lights: the first is that our circumstances have changed dramatically in societal change and its impact on our congregation. Our new circumstances gives us a new perspective that can help us read scripture from a different point-of-view. And read it with the question, “How would God have faith communities live in this kind of context?” Finally, prayer: as we ask God to help us know the prompting of the Holy Spirit. This is the needed work of every congregation in Canada. I say that with conviction because I believe the church continues to be one of God’s prime strategies for pursuing God’s mission in the world. In the discomfort of our age I believe God is nudging the church toward renewed ways of being. What’s that way for us? It may not be clear at first...there may even be a bit of stumbling into it until we stumble upon it (though hopefully not as dramatically as Leah, Rachel and Jacob!). But even as we seek to sort it out we can be confident that God nudges our unfolding story. And God will continue to do that, because God commits to work with whatever God gets.

“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players”. I quote this because the next stories of Jacob have the feel of a Shakespearean comedy. For it is a story of romance, skullduggery, mistaken identities, and unexpected plot twists, which finally resolve with a happily-ever-after ending. And while it is a story of great frustration for Jacob, it is a story about God using what God gets...and moving God’s plan along. Jacob left Bethel where he had his vision of God, and headed east. The story begins with “boy meets girl”. Jacob met the beautiful Rachel, and it was love at first sight! He wanted to marry Rachel, so he made a deal with Rachel’s father Laban: I will work for you for 7 years to earn your daughter’s hand in marriage. Laban agreed. After 7 long years, Jacob finally marries Laban’s daughter. The marriage is consummated in a dark tent and when the sun came up Jacob was astonished to find he had married Laban’s daughter Leah, not Rachel! Jacob is outraged! But Laban said, you can marry Rachel as well, now, as long as you work for me 7 more years. Jacob, defeated, agreed to the new contract and married Rachel as well.

More plot twists unfold. Rachel wasn’t having children. God kept Rachel barren—and in that way nudged in the unfolding story—resulted in a domino effect of consequences. But Rachel, Leah and Jacob didn’t see it that way—they saw the unfolding story of their life as the consequence of chance and choices. Leah gave birth to four sons. And, as in any good soap opera, Rachel grew jealous. So she gave her servant Bilhah to Jacob as a wife, so that Rachel could adopt Bilhah’s children as her own. Two more boys. Now, because of this, Leah grew concerned that she would lose favour in Jacob’s eyes, so she gave her maid Zilpah to Jacob as his fourth wife, and she bore him two more sons. Leah, wanting more of Jacob’s attention, next went to Rachel and offered her some hallucinogenic plants in trade for a night of sex with Jacob. Rachel agreed. As the New Revised Standard translates it, “When Jacob came from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him, and said, “You must come in to me; for I have hired you” (30:16). In time Leah gave birth to two more sons and a daughter. Finally, after all this drama, God reenters the story. We read, “Then God remembered Rachel”. God took away her barrenness. The first hope of Rachel and Jacob was finally fulfilled, and she gave birth to Joseph first and later Benjamin.

This whirlwind tale has the feel of a daytime soap opera, doesn't it? But in the midst of this human drama of human decisions and actions and consequences, the storyteller of Genesis wants us, the reader, to observe one other cast member in this play: God. At the beginning of this tale we hear that God caused Leah to be fertile and Rachel to be barren. God nudged the unfolding story and that one influence had a domino effect on the drama that followed. Then, near the end, God nudged it again, and Jacob in time became the proud father of 12 sons and one daughter. Last week we heard God make a commitment to Jacob: "Your offspring shall be as numerous as the dust of the earth". Through the crazy human drama of this story that promise was beginning to unfold. In time those 12 sons would become the patriarchs of the 12 tribes of Israel. And yet even though we the reader hear about God nudging their lives, Rachel, Leah and Jacob appear to be unaware.

Then we get the next crazy story, which we read today. By now Jacob had fulfilled his 14-year commitment to Laban and he wanted to go home. Jacob proposed a new deal: Laban would get to keep the sheep and goats which were pure white and Jacob could have those that weren't as his payment for 14 years labour. Laban agreed. But Laban wanted to squeeze one more advantage out of Jacob. That night Laban hid all the spotted and coloured livestock. So when Jacob got up the next day, every animal in the flock was pure white and thus – according to Jacob's deal – all Laban's property. Laban had bested Jacob again! So Jacob started his animal breeding program. He got this bright idea that if he left spotted and striped sticks where the sheep and goats mated those animals would produce spotted and striped offspring. And it worked! So Jacob continued his successful program. And we read, "Thus Jacob grew exceedingly rich, and had large flocks, and male and female slaves, and camels and donkeys".

Now, as modern readers, we all get that Jacob's hairbrained scheme was nonsensical. And I think the story is so outlandish that the ancient Jewish hearers of this story would also know it was crazy. For readers—ancient and modern—the only conclusion we can draw is that God must have done it. But here is the thing in this second story. Jacob thought what happened was the consequence of his idea and his actions. Even though we the reader—both ancient and modern—know it can't possibly be that. So what do we see in these two stories? In both stories we see God nudging the the stories of these people's lives—here, there—to influence how the story would unfold. But for the people in the story—Jacob, Leah, Rachel—they weren't aware of those nudges. They weren't looking for those nudges. In fact, in the second story, Jacob assumed it was all about him, not God. But what does the story

affirm? Even if we don't notice it God is working behind the scenes, working with what God gets, pursuing the outcome God wants.

So does God do the same with us? Does God nudge the unfolding story of Varsity Acres Church? These stories speak to a very practical and important question for people of faith. If we believe God exists then to what degree does God interact with the world? When and how does God intervene? Every one of us has beliefs about this, whether we appreciate it or not, and those beliefs influence our expectations about God. People's answer to this question fall on a spectrum. One extreme is the belief that God controls everything. This view is called Determinism, and in this view (for example) the the genocide of 6 million Jews in the Holocaust would have been God's plan because God determines everything. I think we would resist that idea. On the other end of the spectrum is the view that God exists but is either powerless or chooses to not intervene at all. This view is called Deism: that God is totally hands off. I think most of us probably find that idea unsatisfactory as well. If you don't adhere to either Determinism or Deism it means that you believe God does intervene sometimes and in some ways. Like in these two stories of Jacob.

So when are those "sometimes" and how are those "some ways"? I think for a lot of us, including me, we can be functional agnostics. In response to the question "when and how does God intervene in life?" we can say "I don't know", and then get on with living life as if God is not there at all...which is really how Jacob, Rachel and Leah lived. And it is so easy to live life this way. It is easy to go through life assuming what happens is only the consequence of chance and choices. But what will we miss if we do live this way—as functional agnostics? Put differently, what do we gain if we discern the way God has nudged the story of our life?

Let's think about this in terms of a congregation. All congregations believe that they live their life faithfully (that's a really good thing to believe, certainly!). They believe that their priorities, activities, relationships and organization reflects that faithfulness. For many congregations this belief becomes its premise. Consequently they assume that maintaining what they've always done will ensure ongoing faithfulness. And so they carry on carrying on, attentive to maintaining their priorities, activities and organization, with the occasional distraction of the small soap operas that at times grabs the attention and energy of all congregations. This is typical of most congregations. But if a congregation focuses this way then it runs the risk of overlooking something we've just affirmed in our belief. We believe that God at times and in some ways will give us a bit of a nudge. Now congregations can be like the experience of Jacob, Leah and Rachel. The nudge can go unobserved, but it can