

Holding On

Why does she do it? Why does Rachel take the household gods? I am so curious about this question! Why?

As I tell Rachel's story - I want you to know up front that she struggles with infertility - it is a painful reality in the lives of many - quite likely some of you - and I hope that as we move through the story, you will do what you need to do to care for yourself in this time. And as always - Ben and I are happy to hold your story and grief together with you - please reach out.

We are first introduced to Rachel at a well. She has brought her father's sheep, which she tended, to be watered. When Jacob sees her he is moved to tears. She is graceful and beautiful and Jacob falls in love with her. Her father, Laban, agrees that the two can marry after Jacob works for him for seven years. Which he does - and on the wedding night, his bride comes to him, veiled until the morning. Can you imagine his shock when he discovers that he has just married Rachel's sister Leah and not his own beloved? Laban has switched the daughters. Where is Rachel in all of this? Did she know of her father's trickery? Did he have to force her to hide so she didn't ruin his plans? Does she feel betrayed by both her father and Jacob? How does she feel about Leah?

Laban explains himself by saying that it is customary for the older daughter to marry first. And that Jacob can still marry Rachel - as long as he's willing to work another seven years. What is that wait like for Rachel? Jacob loves her and chooses to work the seven years as opposed to cutting and running. But does that help soften the blow?

Rachel's life after her marriage to Jacob does not get easier. Her sister Leah is able to get pregnant and have sons. And Rachel is not. She cries out in pain and desperation that she almost wishes she could die. Whatever relationship she has with her sister becomes rife with envy. They enter a competition of sorts, using their female slaves to help expand the family - counting the children of those women - Bilhah and Zilpah as their own in a bid to provide the most sons. But still Rachel does not get pregnant. Her grief is immense.

And then...finally - after Leah has had 6 sons and one daughter...finally, Rachel becomes pregnant and gives birth to Joseph.

Around this same time, Jacob decides that it is probably about time for him to return to his own family with the wealth he has accumulated. You may remember that he met Rachel while fleeing from the anger of his brother Esau, who blessing he had just stolen. Laban says they can work out the division of sheep and goats based on which ones have speckles and stripes and which ones are solidly colored. Then - because we know already that Laban cannot be trusted. He takes all the male goats that are speckled to another field - several days journey away.

Jacob is apparently a whiz with animal husbandry - because he somehow manages to keep the speckled kids and lambs coming - despite Laban's attempts at sabotage. Jacob becomes

exceedingly wealthy. And begins to notice that Laban is less than pleased with him. Things have gotten quite tense around the dinner table. So Jacob speeds up his plans to leave and go back home. He calls Rachel and Leah into the field to talk it over. He tells his wives that clearly he has worn out his welcome with their father - and that the God whom he and his family have served will be faithful to them. He tells them how Laban has cheated him and changed his wages and used trickery. Certainly the sisters who were switched at marriage are not surprised by these antics. They respond - It's not like anything that is in our father's house will come to us. His wealth will not be passed on to us or our children. Let's take whatever is rightfully ours and get away.

So they do. The family hurriedly packs their things and flees from Laban. Because certainly Laban wasn't just going to let them leave with all that wealth.

And in the midst of this flurry of packing - Rachel, who is preparing to leave her home - to leave all she has ever known. Who will likely never be back. Rachel sneaks into her father's tent and steals his household gods. Small objects of worship - representations of spirits that protect and enlighten. She takes them and they are off.

Our scripture reading showed us what happened when Laban found out - he and the rest of the household come after them. Do we believe Laban when he asks why they snuck away? I would have thrown you a party - and kissed my daughters and grandchildren goodbye! So why steal from me...

Jacob, not knowing Rachel has stolen the gods, and perhaps not thinking fully through what he is saying, says that if Laban can find them - then whoever has stolen them will be killed. Laban searches and searches. Rachel - in one of the only places where she is recorded as showing agency, hides the gods in her pack and sits on them. When Laban comes to her tent - she has clearly inherited some of her father's trickery - claiming to be on her period so that he will not touch her or anything she is touching. Likely her heads up thinking saves her life. Women in this world do all sorts of things to survive.

But we still don't know why? Why does she do it? Why take these household gods?

She is on the brink of an entirely new life - in an unknown place with unknown people. Is there some comfort in familiar trinkets? In the complete dysfunction of her family - are these gods one small piece of beauty? Perhaps ones that her mother also valued and kept? Scholars wonder if she is trying to protect her father from idol worship or perhaps making sure the gods don't reveal to Laban their location. Is she hedging her bets? Forced to flee into the protection of a God she does not know, does she want the security of one she does? How many times had she prayed to those gods? Is she angry? Trying to hurt Laban? Holding on to the years of dishonesty and carrying it forward into her new life? After all she has been through - all she has suffered - all the ways in which she has been forced to be a pawn in the hands of the powerful around her - why is this the place where she draws the line and acts of her own volition? Why? Why does she take the gods?

Why do any of us hold onto things? Or roles? Or labels? Or coping mechanisms? Or feelings What are the things we simply cannot let go? When you are on the brink of something new - what old things or ways of being follow you into the next stage? What are the old and familiar parts of yourself - even parts you have worked to heal or grow - that stay with you?

How do you decide what you carry with you and what you leave behind?

There is much moralizing over Rachel's choice. It's wrong to steal - wrong to lie to conceal the stealing. There is even the suggestion that her death in childbirth is tied to this moment. A divine honoring of Jacob's rash declaration of death for whoever stole from Laban.

But what if we see her - and ourselves with a bit more grace? A bit more compassion?

Like the stories from Genesis that we have read over the last several weeks, families are complicated. Our lives are complicated. And it is no simple thing to choose our paths forward or what will hold meaning as we move into a future we cannot control or predict. It is difficult to let go - even when we know we need to change. And it can be equally difficult to hold on.

Yet I suspect that all of us have things we need to let go of...and we also have some things we need to hold on to. Physical things, emotional things, patterns, dreams...like Rachel....we all have things...

So how do we know...what is worth holding on to - and how do we decide?

I wonder if a poem by Nikki Grimes begins to give us a way forward into something new. Listen with openness to Hoarder Control...

Hoarder Control by Nikki Grimes

Imagining ourselves enlightened
The thought of Aaron's Golden Calf
Tends to make us laugh
But where is our
Moral high ground?
Blocks and blocks
Of storage lockers
Line our roadways
The new cathedrals at which
We worship the coarseness
Of too many possessions.
Are these not the bigger barns
The rich man in Luke conjured,
The shallow places created

To house the hollowness
Of things?
Oh, Jehovah-jireh is pleased
To feed the sparrow
Dress the lilies of the field
And provide
Everything we need
But after all our grasping
Leads us past praising God
For the good gift of himself,
The time comes to clear the shelf
Lay everything on the altar, once again
Seek first the kingdom of God
Cry out, Father, forgive us!
Then, prostrate before him
And ask Lord, what would you have us do
With these gifts?

Amen