

“Love Comes Close”

|Genesis 29 – 30:2

Kimberley Morrison

October 15, 2023

We are in a sermon series titled *Thin Spaces: Encountering Glory*.

A thin space is a time and place where the distance between heaven and earth, between the Divine and the human, between the immortal and the mortal has become thin – heaven comes close, God’s glory comes near, and life is forever altered.

The purpose of this sermon series is not primarily to appeal to your head – with new facts and ideas, but to touch your heart, expand your spirit and fill your soul with the beauty of the God who comes near. I want us to fall in love with Jesus all over again!

We have considered three thin spaces where God met with men – Moses prepared a tent of meeting so he could spend time with God – a thin space is often the place where we choose to set aside time to be with God.

Abel offered the work of his hands as a gift to God. A thin space may be in our vocation as we offer up our daily work to God.

Abraham was met by God in a time of fear and anxiety when hope was deferred for ten years – a thin space may be God meeting us in the depths of despair and hopelessness.

We are also considering how God came close to three women. Each of these women meet God in a broken system. Last week we considered Hagar, as God met her in broken social systems filled with the darkness of racism, sexism, slavery and workplace abuse. This week we will consider how God meets Leah in broken family systems and next week Sarah Groot will be with us teaching us about how God meets Hannah in broken religious systems.

Today as we prepare to jump into the midst of the story of Leah, I would like to ask God to meet us here, enlighten our hearts and help us to see the beauty of the God who comes near.

PRAYER

Leah Background

Jacob has just been sent to find a wife and received a blessing from his father Isaac

“Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and directed him, “You must not take a wife from the Canaanite women. Arise, go to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel your mother's father, and take as your wife from there one of the daughters of Laban your mother's brother. God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. May he give the blessing of Abraham to you and to your offspring with you, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings that God gave to Abraham!”

Jacob arrives at a well in the area where he has been told he will find his mother's brother Laban – his uncle.

There he meets Rachel. This is a pretty earth-shattering meeting for Jacob. He weeps when he sees her, gives her the traditional kiss of greeting and introduces himself.

Rachel takes Jacob to meet her father who is Laban. Jacob welcomes Laban. Jacob tells Laban the story of his journey and of news from home.

Jacob stays for a month with Laban. Jacob is an experienced shepherd, he impresses Laban with how he can handle the flocks of sheep and goats. Laban asks him what he wants in return for his work. And Laban asks for Rachel as a bride.

Laban has 2 daughters. The scriptures note, “Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷ Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance.”

Jacob tells Laban he will serve as a shepherd for 7 years in order to earn the right to marry Rachel.

Listen to what the scripture says about how Jacob experienced those 7 years of work, “So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.”

Jacob completes the 7 years of service and then asks for his bride.

Think about what we might understand as related to Leah in the narrative so far.

Leah was the eldest daughter – when she was born she would have been the center of attention – until Rachel was born. Her younger sister was the beautiful one. As soon as she was born all eyes turned to her. Leah would have watched the herdsmen admiring her sister as she grew up and felt herself being ignored. Leah has witnessed Jacob being smitten with Rachel.

Leah has been around for the seven-year courtship of Rachel and Jacob. In all those years no suitors have come wanting to marry her. She has watched Rachel and Jacob flirting and cavorting. She knows how deeply Jacob loves Rachel and wants her for his own.

After the 7 years are up, Jacob asks Laban for his bride in a very explicit and crass way. The choice Laban makes creates a living hell for his entire family.

Laban the Swindler

Laban gives Leah to Jacob. “So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast. But in the evening, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob and he went in to her.”

And in the morning, behold it was Leah!

This seems like an incredibly strange story to our ears and upon a quick reading of the text. Why would he not have known it was Leah previously.

We cannot know for certain but there are 2 hints in the text.

First the “feast” mentioned in 29:22 is actually the word *mishteh* that is translated drinking party.

Second, in the evening he brought Leah. Remember the available lights are very minimal and for the sake of modesty it is possible that candle light may have been available but in a discreet way.

In the 12th century the interpretation of this passage by Jewish translators called the Tosafot suggested, “Laban gathered all the men of the area and had a *mishteh* (feast, literally drinking party) – Laban was the father of swindlers and this is why he is called Laban the Aramean (i.e. understood as a metathesis for *ramai*, “trickster), and he intended to get Jacob drunk in order to fool him such that he would be unable to distinguish between Rachel and Leah.

Note (in support of this) that he had no “drinking party” a week later when Laban gave Jacob his daughter Rachel to be his wife. (Gen 29:28).

We cannot know for certain why Jacob could not tell the difference between Rachel and Leah, but it is evident that in the morning Jacob is furious to discover that he has been deceived.

Laban makes the excuse that the older daughter had to be married before the younger and promises Jacob that if he works for him for another 7 years, he can have Rachel.

He also promises that if Jacob spends just a week with Leah, he can then be given Rachel – in advance of the 7 years of work.

Jacob completed his week with Leah and then Laban gave him Rachel as his wife. The text says that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah and served Laban for another seven years.

This is a dark and broken family system.

Laban is a cheat, a deceiver and a swindler. He creates a scenario that defrauds Jacob, Leah and Rachel.

He creates a scenario where Jacob and Rachel are ultimately both furious with Leah.

Leah has her first sexual experience with a man who is most likely drunk and who thinks he is making love to a different woman.

Leah is given one week with Jacob – during which Rachel would have been filled with rage and anger against her sister.

Laban wounded, misused and treated both of his daughters with contempt. He showed total disregard for who they were as persons.

It is evident that the outcome for Leah was overwhelming.

Leah the Hated One

The text says when the Lord saw that Leah was hated.

When the Lord saw that Leah was hated.

Leah was hated by her father, her sister and her husband. There is such darkness, sadness and disregard of human dignity in this family system. Laban insists that Jacob must be with Leah for a week, likely for the purposes of breeding. This is a story of sexual, emotional and psychological abuse.

This is not just an ancient story. This is a modern story. The national coalition against domestic violence suggests that nearly 20 people per minute are physically abused by a partner in the United States. This equates to more than ten million women and men.

1 in 4 women and 1 in 9 men experience severe intimate partner physical abuse.

Many family systems in our nation are ugly and dark. The form of darkness may be different but the result is the same – broken-hearted, hated people.

Reuben: I Love You

When God sees that Leah is hated – he intervenes. God comes close. God is present in the midst of this broken system. Notice what he does. Because she is hated, God gives her children; but he does not give Rachel children.

God's gift of a child to Leah is God's statement to Leah, "I love you, you are not hated."

Leah conceives and gives birth to a child that she names Reuben – meaning "behold a son."

When Leah gives birth, she states "because the Lord has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me."

Leah acknowledges that God has come close. She knows that God has seen her, that God has seen her suffering and that God has given her this child. In this thin space of child-bearing Leah knows she has been seen by God.

But – look at how Leah responds to this gift of love from God – "now my husband will love me." Leah acknowledges God – but the love of God is not something she rejoices in. Leah wants to take the gift of God's love and use it to get the love she really wants – the love of her husband.

How often do we go to God asking him for things we want because the presence of God alone is not adequate to us, his love for us is not enough – we want God to be the servant to our desires rather than the desire itself.

Think as well of the ramifications for her son Reuben – Leah instrumentalizes Reuben as a means of getting love from her husband.

God has said to Leah in the birth of a healthy little boy, "Leah, I love you."

Leah has responded – "I see what you have done for me, but I want the love of a husband."

Simeon: I Love You

God does not give up on Leah. God wants Leah to receive his love.

She conceived again and bore a son. Simeon – his name means “heard”.

How does Leah process this birth. “because the LORD has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also.”

Again, Leah rightly understands why the child was given to her. She acknowledges that this child is a gift of God. The child is in fact a sign that God sees her in her wretchedness and God loves her. For a second time, God says to Leah “I love you.” What is Leah saying back, “the love I truly desire is that of my husband, this son is to make up for the fact that I am hated by the one whose love would make me whole – the love of my husband.”

This is the second time that Leah has acknowledged the gift of God, but the love of God is not enough for her. Leah knows that she has been heard, that God has come close, that God has stooped down to her in her pain. But she is so immersed in the narrative that if she had the love of a husband, she would be happy that she cannot receive the true gift of God.

Levi: I Love You

God does not give up on Leah. A third time God says to Leah, “I love you.” Leah has a third child and names this child Levi meaning “joined to” because she says, “Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have born him three sons.”

Leah is obsessed with only one love – she wants the love of a husband.

Leah wants the gifts of God to be the means for her to earn the favor of her husband. This child is again instrumentalized by Leah to be a means of earning love. God offers her the free gift of love and she still feels she must earn love, and the love she desires is the love of a husband.

God refuses to give up. God's love is coming after Leah. God is coming close. This woman obsessed with the need for her husband's love has three beautiful male children upon whom she could lavish her love. This woman who was the overlooked ugly daughter has been granted power and status by God. This woman has produced three sons in quick succession. God has taken the broken and ugly family system and turned it on its head. Leah the ugly and dismissed is Leah the blessed, the mother of many sons.

Judah: I Love You

When Leah for the third time ignores God's clear and evident love what does God do?

She conceived again and bore a son.

She names this child Judah meaning praise or song of praise.

And she states, "this time I will praise the Lord."

This is wild. Finally, God says to Leah a fourth time, "I love you." And what does Leah say – not now my husband will love me, not, God sees I'm hated, not, this time my husband will love me.

Leah simply says this time I will praise the Lord. This time Leah was ready to receive the gift of love from God. Leah finally looks past the love she cannot have to the love that has always been there, the love behind the gift of each son, the love that has granted her a place in her family system of respect and honor.

Leah finally sees God.

Leah is just like you and me. Leah wants God to be the servant to her desires instead of her desire.

Leah was brutally abused, oppressed, ignored, dismissed and isolated by her family system. She could not easily receive the love of God - she was frantically seeking to

find a way to be accepted and loved by her family. It took time and convincing evidence from God to Leah for her to consider that she could be loved.

Leah's journey to receive love was a span of four sons. God was patient, gentle and meek as he accompanied Leah on the journey to receive God's love.

Take a moment to think – how has God been coming close to you? How has God been saying “I love you.” But you have been unable to hear his voice. God has been coming close, bringing heaven near – but because he has not been coming as a servant to your desires but has been offering you himself – you have not been willing to be satisfied with God.

Do you see the beauty of a God who enters this broken, dark and ugly family system and lavishes love upon Leah. Do you see Leah – so enmeshed in her obsession that she keeps missing God's love? But not only that, she keeps missing the wonder and beauty of the sons who are God's gift to her. She keeps wanting to trade their presence for the love of a husband – offering them up as proof that she is worthy.

How very sad. God is the bright and uneclipsed light in the terrible darkness of this family system.

Isn't it interesting that it is Judah – the son who turns his mother's heart to God who becomes the ancestor to David – and to David's greater son – Jesus of Nazareth.

It is Leah, not Rachel, from whose line the Messiah will come. The greatest honor of all earthly honors that could be bestowed upon a woman in Israel would be for her to be in the lineage of the Messiah. God gives Leah this beautiful gift.

God rights the injustice perpetrated against Leah as the unloved wife in another beautiful way – in the final resting place of the patriarchs in the cave of MacPelah lie Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob and Leah.

The crazy thing about this broken family system is the relationship between Rachel and Jacob. Jacob is besotted with Rachel, he worked 14 years to earn her and has been described as being madly in love with her – 7 years working for her seemed like just a

few days. But notice – Rachel’s words to her husband, “Give me children or I shall die.” Rachel is unsatisfied with the love of her husband. The text makes it clear that she does not desire the children because her heart longs for a child but because of her envy. Jacob becomes furious with Rachel and rightly responds, “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?”

Jacob knows that it is God who has been giving his wife Leah children.

Look at the 2 sisters. Each had what the other desired and neither was satisfied.

What darkness lies in the heart of this family system!

Yet God insists on giving power to the powerless and love to the hated. God raises Leah up to be honored among her kin and to have the joy of sons. God persists in pursuing the woman hated in her own family, despised and rejected.

What sort of God is this?

The beauty of God in this story wounds the heart of any human. A God who pursues the unloved and unlovely.

Why God Can Lavish Love

But a question remains. How is it possible for God to lavish love on people and systems that are so dark? How can God come close to people who fall so short of the glory of God?

Does not Psalm 15 say, “O Lord who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? The person who walks blamelessly and does what is right.”

How then is it possible for God to enter our broken family systems, enter our broken social systems, or enter our own broken and darkened hearts. In every thin space where God has shown up to display his glory – he is always revealing himself and his presence to a person who is filled with darkness. God is not reveling himself to people who walk blamelessly or do what is right. So how does this make any sense at all?

Every thin space where God came near anticipated the coming of Jesus, the light of the world.

Isaiah 9: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness on them has light shone.”

John 1: “The true light which gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

Jesus the light of the world came into our broken social systems and our broken family systems. The human race alienated from the light, loved darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. We snuffed out the life of that radiant light.

“And you who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.” Col 1:21,22

The darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.

Are you still dwelling in darkness?

I invite you into the light. You can bow your head or your heart today and simply say, “Jesus, I am tired of the darkness in my heart, I choose to turn from darkness but I need a new heart filled with your light, save me, I cannot save myself.” Amen.

If you are walking in the light with Jesus but feel the oppression of family systems and social systems filled with darkness, all around, we invite you to come forward for prayer.