Foundational Stories #8 of 24:

"The Wedding Surprise"

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Genesis 29:15-28

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

July 26, 2026

Everybody loves a good wedding, right? A beautiful couple, deeply in love, publicly professing their commitments to one another, in front of all their gathered friends and family. There's food, and drink, and a celebratory atmosphere, as everyone cheers and claps for the newly married couple.

Inevitably, something goes wrong. Somebody's clothes don't fit right. Somebody has a health issue and can't be there. Somebody forgets to bring the rings. There's a misunderstanding with the caterer. The list of things that can go wrong is very long, and I always tell couples I'm working with to *expect* that something will probably go wrong, and *that's okay*. What matters, at the end of the day, is that vows are exchanged and the marriage certificate is signed. Frankly, that's all that *really* matters!

Well, one more thing. Let's make sure that the people who are *expecting* to get married are actually the ones who *do* get married. It wouldn't be good if one of them married *the wrong person*! You would think that couldn't possibly happen … but about thirty-six centuries ago, give or take, it *did*!

Who was at the wedding? A bunch of people, of course. You need to know about four of them:

The groom: Jacob, son of Isaac and Rebekah, grandson of Abraham and Sarah. Jacob had a twin brother Esau, who was older than he was by just a smidge. According to the customs of the time, Jacob's brother should have been the one to receive the family inheritance. But Jacob had swindled his brother out of his birthright, and he had also stolen their father's deathbed blessing. Jacob was a swindler, a liar, and a thief – not the most savory of characters! His brother was so furious that he wanted to *kill* Jacob. But Jacob's mother told him to flee, to head north to the family's ancestral homeland, hundreds of miles away in what is now southeastern Turkey. Jacob's father also told him to head north, to find a woman to marry from among their relatives, one of Jacob's cousins. So Jacob had headed north, and he had come to a well near the ancestral home, where he met a young woman who was both "graceful and beautiful."

This is the woman who *should* have been the bride at the wedding. Her name was Rachel, and she was the younger daughter of Jacob's uncle. She had come to the well to fetch water for her father's sheep, a job she did day after day. On that particular day, when she arrived at the well, Jacob was there, and he fetched the water for her. Chivalrous of him, wasn't it? Or … maybe he was just trying to impress her. Because, you know, sometimes guys will do just about *anything* to impress a girl or to get her attention. Standing there beside the well, where they have literally *just met* each other, for was most likely the very first time, "Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud. And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman and that he was Rebekah's son, and she ran and told her father."

This is the third character in our little wedding drama. Rachel's father, Jacob's uncle. His name was Laban. He was delighted to hear that his nephew had arrived for a visit; "he ran to meet him; he embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house." Laban says to Jacob, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" and invites Jacob to stay at his house. A month passes, and Jacob is *still* at the house. He doesn't show any sign of leaving to go back home! And why would he? Back home, he's got a brother who wants to kill him. But here, he has been welcomed by his extended family … and, of course, there's *Rachel*! Laban figures out that Jacob is planning to stick around, and Laban must have been short-handed, because he offers Jacob a job: "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" But Jacob doesn't care about getting paid. What he wants … is *Rachel*. He has nothing to offer Laban in exchange for Rachel's hand in marriage – he doesn't have that inheritance yet – so he makes Laban an incredibly generous (and incredibly bold!) offer: "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." Laban likes this offer; he will get an able-bodied male servant in his house for *seven whole years*, and he won't have to pay any wages. This sounds like a *really* good business deal! He says to Jacob: "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." So Jacob works for his uncle, without pay, for *seven whole years*, expecting that at the end of it, he will marry his beloved Rachel. The narrator says: "Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her." This is where you should all say, *awwww, that's so sweet!* (But is it sweet or is it sappy?!?)

There's one other important character in this wedding drama: Laban's older daughter, Rachel's sister. Her name was Leah. Evidently, she wasn't very attractive, or at least, Jacob didn't think she was. The narrator says, "Her eyes were weak" – or something like that. One Hebrew word is a little obscure and we're not quite sure what it means. Some other translations say "her eyes were tender," or "her eyes were delicate." A few translations say her eyes were "lovely." Some say they were "attractive." One says they were "gentle." One describes them as "dull." Another says she had "sad eyes." One just says that "Leah was plain," and one paraphrase just puts it all like this: "There was no sparkle in Leah's eyes." Whatever was going on with her, Jacob didn't find her attractive, and apparently nobody else did either, because nobody has asked for Leah's hand in marriage. This is a problem. Laban wants *both* of his daughters to get married. And Laban was a pretty crafty man. Kind of like Jacob, really. Crafty, cunning, and devious. For when Jacob has served in Laban's household for seven whole years, Jacob confronts Laban: "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." So, Laban plans a wedding. A grand and glorious wedding; he "gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast." The kind of wedding we all enjoy going to, right? One of those joyous, happy occasions, as we watch two lovebirds – in this case, Jacob and Rachel – tie the knot, so they can live happily ever after!

Except … that's not exactly what happened here. Laban played a dirty trick on Jacob. A *really* dirty trick, one of the dirtiest tricks in the Bible. Laban took his older daughter Leah and dressed her up as his younger daughter Rachel. Leah, not Rachel, got to wear the bridal gown and the bridal veil. Laban must have done something with Rachel; I can't imagine that she would have willingly gone along with this plan; maybe he had one of his other servants lock her in her room or something. I don't know!

So Jacob marries Leah – thinking it's Rachel – and then he takes her to bed – again thinking it's Rachel. "When morning came, it was Leah!" *Surprise!* I have to wonder, *how did Jacob not know?* Did they look *that* much alike? Did they *sound* that much alike? Was Leah *that* good an actor? Here's my best guess: Laban made sure that Jacob's wine glass got lots and lots of refills on that wedding night!

Well, as you can imagine, Jacob was pretty upset. "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" Jacob – who had deceived his brother twice – now finds out what it feels like to be on the *receiving* end. Not that we should "do unto others" as they "do unto us" – Jesus told us "do unto others what you *would* have them do unto you." (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31) Laban explains to Jacob: "This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn." It's the honest truth that he *should* have told Jacob years earlier. He makes Jacob an offer: "we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." Jacob agrees to this. He didn't really have a choice, if he wanted to marry Rachel. He serves Laban for seven more years, and at the end of it all, there's *another* wedding. Jacob *finally* gets the bride he wanted, his beloved Rachel.

So now Jacob has two wives. At first, Jacob and Rachel don't succeed in having any children, but Jacob and Leah have four: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Leah named them all; their names mean "See, a son;" "he has heard;" "he will be joined;" and "I will praise." She explains each name: "Because the Lord has looked on my affliction, surely now my husband will love me;" "Because the Lord has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also;" "Now this time my husband will be joined to me, because I have borne him three sons;" and "This time I will praise the Lord." It's clear from Leah's words that, even though she is Jacob's wife and the mother of his children, Jacob does not love her at all.

Then Rachel gets jealous, and she gives Jacob her maid Bilhah, so that Rachel can have children through her. Bilhah bears two sons, whom Rachel names Dan and Naphtali, which mean "He judged" and "I have wrestled," because – in Rachel's words – "God has judged me and has also heard my voice and given me a son;" and "With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed."

Then Leah wants to have more children, but she thinks she can't, so she gives Jacob her maid Zilpah. She has two sons: Gad, which means "Fortune," and Asher, which means "Happy," because Leah said, "Good fortune!" and "Happy am I! For the women will call me happy." That's *eight* sons so far.

After that, Leah bears two more sons, Issachar and Zebulon. Their names mean "My hire" and "honor," for Leah said, "God has given me my hire because I gave my maid to my husband" and "God has endowed me with a good gift; now my husband will honor me, because I have borne him six sons." Leah also gives birth to a daughter, whose name was Dinah. Her name means "judged" or "vindicated."

Then, finally, after all this time, Rachel gets pregnant. She gives birth to Joseph, whose name means "He adds," because Rachel prayed, "May the Lord add to me another son!" Quite a while later, she has a second son. Rachel wanted to call him Ben-Oni, which means "son of my sorrow," but Jacob gave him the name Benjamin, which means "son of the right hand" or "son of the south."

That makes a total of twelve sons and one daughter. Those children have children, and they have children. A whole *people* emerges – the descendants of Jacob. He will later be called "Israel," so all of Jacob's descendants are called "Israelites." Jacob's sons become the heads of the twelve *tribes* of Israel.

One of those tribes is the one that Jesus will be born into: the tribe of Judah. Judah was one of the sons of *Leah*. Not Rachel. If Jacob had just married Rachel the way he wanted to, where would Jesus have come from? Jacob had treated Leah *horribly* – but *she matters*. She *really* matters. Everyone who is unloved, despised, or rejected – all the Leahs of the world – they *all* matter. Jesus loves them *all*.

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