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Jacob flees Laban. Joy and peace in the world.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Genesis chapter 31. Your Father does not regard me with favor, as He did before. But the God of my Father has been with me.

You know that I have served your Father with all my strength. Yet your Father has cheated me, and changed my wages ten times. But God did not permit him to harm me.

If He said, The spotted shall be your wages, then all the flock bore spotted. And if He said, The striped shall be your wages, then all the flock bore striped. Thus God has taken away the livestock of your Father and given them to me.

In the breeding season of the flock, I lifted up my eyes, and saw in a dream that the goats that mated with the flock were striped, spotted, and mottled. Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, Jacob. And I said, Here I am.

And he said, Lift up your eyes and see. All the goats that mate with the flock are striped, spotted, and mottled. For I have seen all that Laban is doing to you.

I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now arise, go out from this land, and return to the land of your kindred. Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our Father's house? Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and he has indeed devoured our money.

All the wealth that God has taken away from our Father belongs to us and to our children. Now then, whatever God has said to you, do. So Jacob arose and set his sons and his wives on camels.

He drove away all his livestock, all his property that he had gained, the livestock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan Aram, to go to the land of Canaan, to his father Isaac. Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household gods. And Jacob tricked Laban the Aramean by not telling him that he intended to flee.

He fled with all that he had, and arose and crossed the Euphrates, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead. When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled, he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him for seven days, and followed close after him into the hill country of Gilead. But God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night, and said to him, Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.

And Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen pitched tents in the hill country of Gilead. And Laban said to Jacob, What have you done that you have tricked me, and driven away my daughters like captives of the sword? Why did you flee secretly and trick me, and did not tell me, so that I may have sent you away with mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre? Now you have done foolishly.

It is in my power to do you harm. But the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad. And now you have gone away, because you long greatly for your father's house.

But why did you steal my gods? Jacob answered and said to Laban, Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. Anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live. In the presence of our kinsmen, point out what I have that is yours, and take it.

Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them. So Laban went into Jacob's tent, and into Leah's tent, and into the tent of the two female servants. But he did not find them.

And he went out of Leah's tent, and entered Rachel's. Now Rachel had taken the

household gods, and put them in the camel's saddle, and sat on them. Laban felt all about the tent, but did not find them.

And she said to her father, Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me. So he searched, but did not find the household gods. Then Jacob became angry, and berated Laban.

Jacob said to Laban, What is my offence? What is my sin that you have hotly pursued me? For you have felt through all my goods. What have you found of all your household goods? Set it here before my kinsmen and your kinsmen, that they may decide between us two. These twenty years I have been with you.

Your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, and I have not eaten the rams of your flocks. What was torn by wild beasts I did not bring to you. I bore the loss of it myself.

From my hand you required it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. There I was. By day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes.

These twenty years I have been in your house. I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times. If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed.

God saw my affliction and the labour of my hands, and rebuked you last night. Then Laban answered and said to Jacob, The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day for these my daughters or for their children whom they have borne? Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me.

So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar, and Jacob said to his kinsmen, Gather stones. And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. Laban called it Jigar sehaduthah, but Jacob called it Galid.

Laban said, This heap is a witness between you and me today. Therefore he named it Galid. Amispah.

For he said, The Lord watch between you and me when we are out of one another's sight. If you oppress my daughters, or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no one is with us, see, God is witness between you and me. Then Laban said to Jacob, See this heap and the pillar which I have set between you and me? This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass over this heap to you, and you will not pass over this heap and this pillar to me, to do harm.

The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us. So

Jacob swore by the fear of his father Isaac, and Jacob offered a sacrifice in the hill country, and called his kinsmen to eat bread. They ate bread, and spent the night in the hill country.

Early in the morning Laban arose and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned home. In Genesis chapter 31, Jacob finally leaves the house of Laban.

In the previous chapter Jacob's family grew and although Laban continued to mistreat him, he outwitted Laban at his own game. God also heard the prayers of Leah and Rachel and gave them children. Now Jacob recognizes that both Laban and his sons are not favorably inclined towards him.

Jacob has been dispossessing them, even as they have been trying to cheat him. Whatever Laban did to try to undermine Jacob, God caused Jacob to prosper against it. While the exact mechanism of Jacob's plan with the rods is much debated, whatever it was, it shows not just Jacob's cunning, but also God's providence.

It is God who ensures that Laban will not defeat Jacob, but that at each stage Jacob will be blessed even as Laban seeks to oppress him. In chapters 29-31, God's providence is also very much active in the hidden realms of conception and birth. This isn't a grand story of miracles and wonders and pyrotechnics that we might find in the story of the plagues, for instance.

Rather, it's a story of God's providence in ensuring that Jacob's wives would be fruitful and that his flocks would be fruitful and that they would bear the right sort of offspring. The changing attitude of Laban to Jacob is similar to the changing attitude of the Egyptians to Israel before the Exodus, and there are a great many Exodus themes in this chapter, themes that we will examine in a moment. Laban had further mistreated Jacob and his daughters by consuming the bride price that Jacob had paid for his daughters.

This was supposed to be their security, something that he would hold in trust for them if they ever needed it. If Jacob mistreated them, or if Jacob died and they needed some security, that money was theirs, but he consumed it for himself. Jacob's flight occurs at the time of sheep shearing.

This is a significant time, as we will see as we go further in the story of scripture, where there are various reminders of the events of this chapter. For instance, in the story of 1 Samuel chapter 25, David has a run-in with Nabal at the time of sheep shearing. He protects Nabal's flocks, but yet Nabal treats him in an ungrateful and unfair manner.

David then sets out to avenge himself against Nabal, going with 400 men to attack him, and then he's pacified by Abigail sending ahead a wave of gifts. And that's what we see in chapter 32 and 33 of Genesis, as Jacob sends gifts ahead of himself to Esau. But Nabal

should remind us of the character of Laban, and sure enough, if you turn around the word Laban, in both Hebrew and English, you get the word Nabal.

And there are connections between these characters in scripture that help us to understand who different figures are. It helps us to understand that David is a new Jacob, but that David can also be pulled at certain points towards the character of Esau. Now Jacob takes his property, crosses the river with the company of his family, livestock and possessions, and goes to the mountains.

It's an Exodus pattern. And just as the Exodus involved the humiliation of false gods, so Rachel humiliates the gods of Laban by stealing them. Again, just as in the Exodus, the departing group is pursued by their former master and overtaken ultimately.

Perhaps we're supposed to see further connections, maybe the ten changes of wages mentioned earlier on in the chapter and then repeated later on, each of which were thwarted by God, is some parallel to the ten plagues. I think that's less certain to me, but it's a possibility. Laban blames Jacob.

As we often see in the accusations of the people of God in Genesis, it shouldn't be taken at face value. Laban, for all his claims, would not have sent Jacob away kindly. God has to intervene to prevent Laban from acting in violence or coercion or some other way against Jacob.

Jacob had to steal away because he genuinely feared that Laban would take Rachel and Leah from him. And again, maybe we can note some parallels between the story of Sarah and Pharaoh or Sarah and Abimelech and the story of Rebecca and Abimelech in chapter 26. Jacob declares a death sentence upon the person who stole Laban's teraphim, his household gods, not knowing that it was Rachel.

Rachel took the teraphim, placed them in her camel's saddlebags and sat upon the camel's saddlebags, claiming that as she was menstruating at the time, she wouldn't get up for her father. Once again, this is one of those stories that has an aftermath to it. It plays out in various other stories in Genesis.

There is the story of Rachel's death. In chapter 37, there is the story of camels coming from Mount Gilead to take her oldest son away. And then finally, there is the story of the pursuit of Benjamin, where again, some means of divination has been stolen and there is a pursuit to obtain it.

There is a death sentence declared upon the person whose possession it is found. There is a searching of property from the oldest to the youngest, finding it in the possession of the youngest, who is the youngest son of Rachel. And then the story proceeds from that.

As I've noted on various occasions, as we see these sorts of connections, we will be helped greatly to read and understand what's taking place within the stories. What were

the Terraphae? Well, they're household gods and some have suggested they were used for divination. They also may have been used to demonstrate property ownership and other things like that.

So they would have a number of different purposes. The fact that they were taken here seems to have some connection with divination, but there might also be some statement about the true possession of Laban's wealth, that by taking the household gods, there's something like taking title deeds to a property. There are themes of deception here as well, which are very important.

In Genesis chapter 3, the woman was deceived and outwitted by the serpent. But in scripture, there's poetic justice in the way that women routinely deceive and outwit tyrants. So maybe think about the Hebrew midwives deceiving Pharaoh, or Rahab deceiving the men of Jericho, or Jail deceiving Sisera, or Michael deceiving Saul, or Esther deceiving Haman.

These stories are a reversal of the original deception. It's a way by which God is going to set things right. But there are other subtle overtones that we might hear though.

As in the story of Jacob deceiving his father Isaac, there was an appropriateness to him having the blessing. But yet, that action and its consequences hung over the rest of his life and had bitter consequences down the line. Here also, the actions of Rachel have a shadow that is cast over her life that follows.

And we'll see some of that as we go through the story. The woman has taken something that was not her own, and a death sentence hangs over her as a result. Much as in the story of Eve in Genesis.

And when Jacob mentions the animals torn by wild beasts, we might have a further sense of premonition. The time will come, not too long hence, when his own son, his son by Rachel, will be presented to him as if it were an animal torn by wild beasts. And so, even if Laban gets what's coming to him, the actions of Rachel have consequences.

Consequences that are very painful in what follows. A question to consider. Can you think about ways in which the characters of Saul, David and Michael in the book of 1 Samuel are like Laban, Jacob and Rachel in the book of Genesis? John chapter 16 verses 16 to 33.

So some of his disciples said to one another, So they were saying, what does he mean by a little while? We do not know what he is talking about. Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy.

When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come. But when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish for joy that a human

being has been born into the world. So also, you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.

In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name.

Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full. I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech, but will tell you plainly about the Father.

In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf, for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father. His disciples said, Ah, now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech.

Now we know that you know all things and do not need anyone to question you. This is why we believe that you came from God. Jesus answered them, Do you now believe? Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone.

Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation.

But take heart, I have overcome the world. At the end of John chapter 16 Jesus teaches his disciples that he will give them joy and peace. The end of chapter 15 and the beginning of chapter 16 speaks about the suffering and the persecution that they will experience in the world.

But even in that situation of suffering and persecution Christ will give them his joy and his peace. Jesus declares to his disciples, A little while and you will see me no longer, and again a little while and you will see me. And in a rather comical manner that statement is repeated almost four times in succession in uncertainty about what it really means.

A little while and you will not see me presumably refers to that period of time leading up to the crucifixion at which point Christ will die and be buried and be removed from their sight. And then that other statement, and again a little while and you will see me, refers to the resurrection that follows. Jesus gives the example of a woman struggling to give birth and then the joy that follows the suffering and the birth pains as an example for understanding his death and resurrection.

The language that Jesus uses and the figures of speech he uses are important. Talk about a woman and then her hour has come. That language is language that we find elsewhere in reference to Christ's death.

Christ uses the language of his hour coming or not yet having come to refer to his death and resurrection. But now it's used in reference to a woman. Throughout the Gospel of John there are a number of references to and stories involving women.

Jesus' mother Mary for instance is not named in the book of John. Rather she is spoken to as woman or spoken of as his mother. These sorts of more generic statements I think highlight her symbolic purpose within the Gospel.

She's significant as an individual but also significant for what she stands for as an individual. The mother or the woman that's about to give birth who brings a new man into the world is a paradigm for understanding what Christ does in his death and resurrection. His death is an event of birth pains and his resurrection is being the first born from the dead.

Christ opens the womb of the tomb. That connection between womb and tomb is something found throughout the Old Testament and into the New. We can think about poetic statements such as knit together in the lowest part of the earth in Psalm 139 which refers to the womb.

Or think about the statement of Job. Naked I came from my mother's womb, naked I will return there. That connection between the woman and the earth is also seen in the original judgments upon humanity.

Where the judgment upon the woman and her womb is paralleled with the judgment upon the man and the earth. Those two things are connected to each other. The original man came from the earth as the womb from which all humanity came.

And then all subsequent human beings come from the womb of their mothers. That womb of their mothers represents something of the reality of the earth itself as our mother, as the womb from which we came. Now when we see those sorts of connections I think we have an insight into a deeper theology of the cross.

Because the cross is an event of birth pains followed by birth. We'll see John picking up on this symbolism a bit more in his crucifixion account. But it is important to register here.

After the resurrection and the ascension the disciples will have greater access to the Father in Christ's name. Praying in Jesus' name does not mean praying for Jesus to pray for us. But rather on account of Jesus having privileged access to the Father as we are known and loved by him.

Now this more direct access to the Father should be related to the advocacy of the Spirit that is at work through and in us. It is not that a reluctant father has to be persuaded by the son to take concern for the church. He loves the church himself, especially as he sees the church and the disciples of his son sharing his love for his dearly beloved son.

The disciples are told that they will soon be scattered like sheep without a shepherd. And yet even as they are scattered Christ will not be left alone. His Father remains with him even in the agony of the cross the Father is there.

And he promises his disciples that in their time of tribulation, in their time of trial, they will not be left alone. He has already promised his disciples joy that will follow from their agony and their sorrow. Now he promises them peace within the world and his presence.

He has overcome the world. Even all the attacks that we might experience within the world are ultimately futile. The futile flailing of a felled foe.

And we should take good cheer recognising in Christ's victory the definitive character of his overcoming of the world. The ruler of this world has been defeated. What can he throw at us now? A question to reflect upon.

Once again Jesus speaks about the new way that his disciples can address the Father in prayer. And this is a running theme of the farewell discourse. And chapter 17 will bring this theme of prayer to its most powerful and pronounced expression.

What sort of theology of prayer might we develop from the discourse to this point? How can we trace the Trinitarian character of prayer from Jesus' teaching in the farewell discourse?