

“Populating the Purposes of God”
 Sermon for 16 February 2020
 Texts: Genesis 29:15-32

One of the most hilarious moments from last year’s Basic’s Conference, for me, came when Alistair Begg declared from the pulpit, “I am happy, so very, very happy.” I laughed so hard that I cried. Alistair is a funny guy, marvelously self-effacing but those words, from his mouth, seemed so incredibly amusing. He is so serious, such a penetrating expositor of the word, but “happy, so very, very happy?” But the hilarity that hit me by his saying those words caught me off-guard. Why? I felt so exposed. Why? I felt embarrassed by his *happiness*—I have no reason to doubt the sincerity of his admission of personal delight, joy. Is it okay to be so very happy? Why would I ever think felicity—another word for happiness—would ever be “out of bounds?” Is it possible that I am hung up on happiness? Fairly frequently Lynne asks me, “Are you happy?” And it leaves me stumped, stymied—at a real loss for either the words, or frustrated in getting in touch with whether or not I am happy—so very happy!—or actually the opposite?

What if Jacob crossed the desert lands some four hundred miles simply to find his happiness? Would that be okay? I do not mean okay with me. I mean would his quest for happiness be okay in itself? Lots of people have written that happiness is what every body hopes for, lives for? So possibly Jacob set out from Canaan in pursuit of personal happiness which he hoped to find in the person of a wife, a wife who came from the family of his mother’s brother, Laban—a daughter and a niece. Does proposing such a thing seem too trivial? Too trifling a matter? Jacob came east looking for happiness in marriage. Is that an improvement? Or not? What if Adam and Eve were happy in the garden, blissfully happy, as in very, very happy? Does that dignify the quest for happiness? Is that any better, loftier than a quest for pleasure, or an adrenalin high, a state of euphoria induced by exertion, stimulants and/or drugs? Surely happiness is distinguishable from being high on something. It is. Happiness is being at peace with, loving and being loved by God—being spiritually in synch with God.

You see, here’s the deal. I have deeply studied the text. I have written a fine bible study on the passage. And I did all that *without mentioning happiness at all*. I might have written blessed, or blessing but happiness, the sense behind the word *markarios* in the *beatitudes* of Jesus—**Blessed are the poor in spirit** is handily translated **Happy, very happy are the poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of the heavens**—and both, or either is equally convicting because Jesus, our Lord, is preaching, out of the gate, on. . . happiness. **Blessed** sounds religious, **Happy, very happy** sounds, well, sacrilegious. But happiness is not unholy.

Genesis 29:1 **Then Jacob set out on his journey in quest of personal happiness to the land of the sons of the east. He sought wholeness, completeness, companionship and marriage.** Among the things left behind was unhappiness. He left a situation where anger, suspicion and bitterness were in ascendance. His family life as in relational ruin, torpedoed by his grasping, his greed, his efforts to advance himself. In short, he fled the consequences of personal sin. Because of sin he lost his family, was alienated from his father, homeless and penniless—he had only the hope of return when rage had settled and transgressions were covered by the salve of passing time. Maybe, someday. So he travels over four hundred miles to Padam Aram, but he never steps out of the linguistic bubble of his native tongue. The **sons of the east** to whom he went spoke the his language: Aramaic. That helped. The

religious barrier (his relatives were pagan idolaters) did not erect insurmountable cultural barriers, or elicit the need for translators. That was happy, bright, encouraging . . . great even.

So he came upon a happy sight: **a well in a field with three flocks of sheep in the vicinity of his destination**. This was by the happy supply of guidance, protection and provision just **as promised by God: I will be with you**. Right place, right time, right people . . . happy, happy, happy. And a familiar arena of expertise: sheep herding. These are fairly welcoming aspects to be supplied in a far country! So Jacob hails these strangers, **“My brothers, where are you from?” And they said, in his language, “We are from Haran.”** Bingo! We get that this could have been much, much more awkward. *But it isn’t. Isn’t that happy?*

“Do you know Laban, the son of Nahor?”

“We know him.”

“Is it well with him?”

“It is well, and here is Rachel his daughter coming with the sheep.”

Of course Rachel, the daughter of Laban, is coming right then. People are part of the plan. And although we can’t know what passed through Jacob’s mind, we do know that he has come all this way looking for *a daughter of Laban and here she is!* While she approaches, Jacob engages in shepherd talk with his fellow shepherds. What he points out establishes that he knows something about the nurture of sheep: **Behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered**. There was probably no fodder in that place and the fact is that having the sheep standing around neither got them the watering or the grazing that they need to prosper. Some *artificial* constraint has caused this malpractice. We should **water the sheep and go, pasture them**, he says. His co-workers demure, **We cannot** (water the sheep) **until all the flocks are gathered, and they** (whoever they are) **roll the stone from the mouth of the well, then**, according to the protocol set forth by the well-owner perhaps, or by habitual practice, or by customary convention, **then we water the sheep**. This regulation of watering is serving other interests than the best interests of the sheep! It is possible that every one sees the *sheep first* orientation of the expert shepherd who just dropped in and things changed.

When the beautiful shepherdess, Rachel, arrives, Jacob is ecstatic. She is everything he might have dreamed she would be . . . *and a touch more*. Jacob is so happy, and excited, that he proceeds to move the large stone whereas, just before, we were led to believe would require a cooperative effort of either handlers, or several shepherds. I think he was showing off to impress the lady. And I think Rachel was happy to see him do it. They seem to have great chemistry from the start and that makes for very happy. Anyway he waters the flock of Laban, which no doubt pleases Rachel. And then, I am not making this up, **Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted his voice** to express gratitude for such a meeting? Perhaps even praising God for success? But doing it all with great passion (for **he wept**). I take it this is happy despite being a little forward to our way of thinking and sudden . . . if not odd behavior.

Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay

My, oh, my, what a wonderful day

Plenty of sunshine headin’ my way

Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay!

Jacob told Rachel that he was a relative of her father and that he was Rebekah’s son, and she ran and told her father. (v.12) Now my assumption is that this information is happily received because, if Laban was having trouble finding a marriageable candidate for Leah *which would be a cultural hindrance to Rachel finding a husband(!)* this would be very good news indeed. Laban’s enthusiastic response points us in that direction. It was a very auspicious and happy, happy day. The older man **ran to meet him** (something only Abraham

and the father in Jesus' parable of "The Prodigal Son" do elsewhere in Scripture) **and embraced him and kissed and brought him to his house. Then he (Jacob) related to Laban all these things.** (v.13)

Jacob stays with Laban for a month and has been useful about the home—and Laban has had a chance to observe Jacob—I assume as a guest, a shepherd, a servant and a suitor to his daughter. He could not have missed the attraction between the two but the problem presented by Leah (her need to be married first) remains intractable. Our passage begins with the conversation initiated by Laban, seeking for formalize what had the potential for permanence: meaning marriage. Ostensibly, today's passage is about Jacob's marriage to two women/sisters and their handmaidens (for a total of four mothers/wives). That is the actual outcome of Jacob's mission to Padam Aram where he was sent in search of a wife from Rebekah's brother's family. That and happiness. This marital plan results in the birth of twelve sons and one daughter and these offspring are part of God's plan to create the Hebrew nation, an amalgam of twelve tribes which originate in this family. So beneath the layer of a polygamous union (remember, four wives), there is ***the grace of God working to populate the plan of God***. In time Jacob's family would morph into a clan, the clan would change into twelve tribes and later, with time, population growth and increasing social complexity and *through the corporate experience of slavery in Egypt*, the Exodus and so forth, the nation Israel would be refined: a chosen people called into existence to achieve the purposes of God, **to be a blessing for all nations. . . a servant people, a holy priesthood**. And from this people would come the Promised Seed, even the King Messiah sent by God to redeem the world! Such ordinary means harnessed to such a grand plan! In some ways, these means are *prototypical*—they anticipate, or point to the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. The fusion of his humanity (the ordinary) with the divine rescue of a lost human race (the grand plan) parallels the historical development of Israel. Between the levels of Jacob's marriage and the subsequent level of God's formation of his chosen people, there is some space. So I want to suggest that between marriage and Jacob's return to Canaan, there is refinement, purification and character formation. God prepares for the restoration of happiness for which we were designed, and which we once enjoyed prior to the catastrophe of the Fall.

Jacob, by marriage, is cast as it were into the cauldron of Laban's family—remember, he is in exile from the Promised Land, the place of his fathers and kin. *Out of the frying pan and into the fire!* The cauldron consists of two wives, two handmaidens, eleven sons, one daughter and great flocks of sheep, herds of goats, camels, cattle and donkeys galore! This ***pastoral wealth*** was certainly comparable to the wealth of Isaac—only his children and animals were the harvest of his labor's abroad, a harvest that God supplied, multiplied and prospered. And, while not visible to the naked eye, we should also include the transformed character of the man who fled his elder brother to seek his happiness abroad. Not a moment of time, not a single day of those twenty some odd years was squandered, or wasted, for *Jacob's character* needed careful attention and masses of work—but then so don't we all. Speaking for myself.

Here is another thing. Our passage from Genesis 29 demonstrates the utter sufficiency of Scripture. That is *provision*: God has supplied in it all he wants us to know, and all we need to know pertaining to the marriage of Jacob. For instance, we read Laban had two daughters. Of course. Laban had two daughters as Isaac had two sons—Isaac's sons were fraternal twins, Leah and Rachel were not twins. However, the tensions between first born and second born, son or daughter, are present in both families. They tussle. An uneasy truce seems to have been the best that one could hope for—but one sees *easily* how the elder son and

daughter, as well as the younger son and daughter shared the commonality of their birth order. The fact that the first born was advantaged (**receiving a double portion**) made for tensions of privilege, favoritism and competition. Rachel and Jacob are younger siblings who work against favoritism, the stacked deck of birth order privilege—they both see their existence in terms of wrestling, always struggling to get their own. There exists a natural bond of affinity between them. They both seek to take what is not rightfully theirs to take; *they both resort to thievery*¹.

Laban's reply to Jacob's demand for his wife, after completing the seven years of labor, is somewhat enigmatic: **It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me**². (v. 19)?? So the reason that Laban wants to formalize their relationship is laid bare. Why would Laban want Jacob to stay with him? Perhaps he wanted a bit of Rebekah back. More pragmatically, and something that he had observed first hand, was that Jacob was an expert shepherd. **And Rachel was also a shepherdess!** She was a working woman. She was not just a beautiful woman (**fair of face and form**—v.17)—with bright, spirited eyes, eyes with a fire behind them—as in winsome, sparkling eyes³. Such bright eyes are “the height of beauty amongst Oriental women” to this day. Where women are heavily veiled, physically covered, it is no wonder that the eyes would count for so much. Leah's eyes were not so striking, or strong and spirited; she may have been correspondingly less rebellious despite the etymology of her name, Leah, as “wild cow.” It would be a short stretch, to suggest that both of Laban's daughters, however, were endowed with congenital wildness! We would do well to remind ourselves of Esau and Isaac's love of wild meat/venison; they both were sensual beings and *Jacob's deportment displays sensuality, too*.

What are the take-aways here? First off, there are real, life consequences to sin. Jacob's alienation from his father and family meant he went penniless to Haran. This kicks into existence the “seven years service” arrangement—what he had was expertise and labor. Loneliness was another secondary cost of betrayal. Thirdly, there does appear to be a Newtonian law of physics in the realm of morality: Jacob, in choosing to get ahead by deception, makes himself a target for deceptive manipulation⁴! If Jacob had not **sought to**

¹ Jacob steals the birthright and the blessing of the first born and Rachel steals her father's household gods. This later could reflect lingering idolatry, a stiffing of her father (birthed out of resentment—as she and Jacob had amassed the sheep together, his loss would be her loss! Or, it could simply be the theft of small valuable items, heirlooms! (Laban's *teraphim*.) Perhaps the fact that they were sacred objects—to which one appealed for health, wealth and prosperity—whose value was increasingly lost on her as she converted to Yahweh-ism, the supposed religion of her husband. We do know that they end up buried beneath the oaks of Mamre.

² One commentator suggests that Laban wanted to adopt Jacob as he had no sons; but that is a misreading of the text. We read in Genesis 30:35 that Laban had sons who he put in charge of his flocks and in 31:1 these same sons are complaining that **Jacob has taken all that was our father's and from what was our father's he has gained all this wealth.** There was serious wealth envy emerging and this coincided with the Lord's command: **Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you.** (31:3) Scripture corrects scripture!

³ “Eyes” were windows to character to the Hebrews, not simply physical organs. They show forth *mental qualities* such as arrogance, humility, mockery and pity. (Brown, Driver and Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, Oxford, 1966, p.744.) So Dillinger concludes that Leah's eyes were “gentle and tender” whereas Rachel's eyes were more “fiery and aggressive”—this would be a sounder interpretation than one restricted to optical adjectives: such as near-sighted, or visually impaired, partially blind etc.

⁴When a robber's truck gets stolen during his heist, who feels sorry for him or sympathizes with his call to the police?!

take it all, he very well might have come with dowry in hand to seek a wife from his uncle's family. Fourteen years of labor is a huge chunk of a life time but it does make the possibility of wealth accumulation very credible. Fourthly, there is the separation from God. It might be reasonable to view the twenty years in Haran, the time lapse between Jacob's first encounter with God at Bethel (Genesis 28:10-22) and the renewal of connection in the directive to return home (Genesis 31:3). Perhaps the stay in Haran was an expiation for personal sin; Jacob's trying times being God's refining influence/ providences. The need for grace is very apparent when Jacob's in-law relationships tanked, and the strife in his tent peaked.

Let us ponder what God sees this morning as he observes what's in our hearts, as he apprise who we truly are. And then let us confess, and repent and seek to conform ourselves to our, renewed, better selves as found in Christ.

Of the all the miracles of Scripture, the resurrection perhaps excepted, of all the wonders, marvels and signs recorded, no miracle is as astounding as the salvation of a single lost soul. That should help us keep our perspective. And, should you be here today, a lost soul, I have a word for you: **Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved.** (Acts 16:31)

If the significance of Jacob's marriage story is not moral primarily—if it doesn't urge you to emulate him or his family and it isn't just a condemnation of polygamous unions, I would suggest this: it is **a demonstration of grace operative in individual and family life**. None of the patriarchal families were healthily functional, and none are presented as a model to be copied by us. They are *cautionary tales* as it were. They illustrate *divine grace* in directing our own lives. And just because some contemporary adulterers don't "marry" their extramarital partners hardly forestalls the tensions always created by overt polygamy—of which *bigamy* is one flavor and *polyamory* is another. The biblical model is one man, one woman for life (become one flesh!) in an exclusive intimate (naked, sexual, unashamed) relationship. (Gen. 2:22-25) because happiness is the chief reason for marriage. Marriage is about also God populating his purposes as I suggested in the title today.

Believing on the Lord Jesus is also where we start to become part of that grand purpose of God. By faith in Jesus, by trusting in his finished work, we are transformed from *mere human beings* into "sons and daughters of the most high God." It is into God's family that our heavenly Father wishes to adopt us. God sent Jesus to seek and recover the "lost"—meaning that those outside the family are being invited into the family of God. We are not grafted into Jacob's family. We are not sucked down into the ordinariness of human existence—but drawn upward in Christ to the life of new creatures created by the Holy Spirit. When by faith we surrender to our lives, our rights, our entire being to Christ, we find happiness. It is a resurrection, not a reprise . . . it is forward movement, not a backwards one. It is his future and not our past that prevails from the day that God first moves us to believe. The door is open, enter here. Happiness is waiting inside the door.

Amen.