

Genesis 29:1–20 (LEB)

And Jacob continued his journey and went to the land of the Easterners. And he looked, and behold, *there was* a well in the field, and behold, *there were* three flocks of sheep lying beside it, for out of that well the flocks were watered. And the stone on the mouth of the well *was* large. And *when* all the flocks were gathered there, they rolled away the stone from the mouth of the well. And they watered the sheep and returned the stone upon the mouth of the well to its place. And Jacob said to them, “My brothers, where *are* you from?” And they said, “We *are* from Haran.” And he said to them, “Do you know Laban, son of Nahor?” And they said, “We know *him*.” And he said to them, “Is he well?” And they said, “*He is* well. Now look, Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep.” And he said, “Look, *it is* still broad daylight; it is not the time *for* the livestock to be gathered. Give water to the sheep and go, pasture them.” And they said, “We are not able, until all the flocks are gathered. Then the stone is rolled away from the mouth of the well, and we water the sheep.” While he was speaking with them, Rachel came with the sheep which belonged to her father, for she was pasturing *them*. And it happened *that*, when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of Laban, his mother’s brother, and the sheep of Laban, his mother’s brother, Jacob drew near and rolled away the stone from the mouth of the well and watered the sheep of Laban, his mother’s brother. And Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted up his voice and wept. And Jacob told Rachel that he *was* the relative of her father, and that he *was* the son of Rebekah. And she ran and told her father. And it happened *that* when Laban heard the message about Jacob, the son of his sister, he ran to meet him. And he embraced him and kissed him, and brought him to his house. And he told Laban all these things. And Laban said to him, “Surely you *are* my flesh and my bone!” And he stayed with him a month.

Then Laban said to Jacob, “*Just* because you *are* my brother should you work for me for nothing? Tell me what your wage *should be*.” Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older *was* Leah, and the name of the younger *was* Rachel. Now the eyes of Leah *were* [soft] dull, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance. And Jacob loved Rachel and said, “I will serve you seven years for Rachel your younger daughter.” Then Laban said, “Better *that* I give her to you than I give her to another man. Stay with me.” And Jacob worked for Rachel seven years, but they were as a few days in his eyes because he loved her.

## Seemed but a Few Days

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: June 23, 2013 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Genesis 29:1-20

Jacob continues his journey. He's been given some confidence by his dream at Bethel. His foot is lighter. But we cannot lose sight of his predicament. A generation ago Abraham had sent his servant Eliezer on this same trip to Padam Aram to find a wife for Isaac, Jacob's father. Eliezer had gone with a large caravan, loaded with supplies and gifts of gold. Ten loaded camels had taken Eliezer to Padam Aram to find a wife for Isaac. Ostensibly, Jacob is on the same errand, to find a wife. But in truth he left in a hurry because he had to get out of town. He had cheated his brother and deceived his father, and Jacob was fleeing for his life, not just for a wife.

So, the journey was very different for Jacob. [slide 1] On foot and alone he traversed over 500 miles through the hill country wilderness of Palestine and the desolate mountains of Syria. It was a forbidding expedition. The sun was searing, and the country arid. Snakes and scorpions crawled in the undergrowth. Wells and springs were infrequent. Food was hard to come by. It was his brother Esau, after all, who was the hunter, not Jacob. Modern day recommendations suggest that hikers plan on walking about seven and a half miles a day in Israel. At that rate, without even counting having to find food and water, it would have taken Jacob well over two grueling months to go from Beersheba to Padam Aram.

But he made it. Today we join him as he arrives. Jacob comes to the same well at which Eliezer had found his mother Rebekah. And something as old as the hills and as modern as today happens. Romance. Jacob falls head over heels for the shepherdess Rachel. It's love at first sight.

It's a great story, too, and it's best told from the beginning. Jacob has followed a course guided by the sun and stars, but he doesn't know exactly where he is. He approaches a well. It is covered with a huge stone. [slide 2] Around the well several shepherds are wiling away the time. Jacob approaches them and strikes up a conversation.

"My brothers, where *are* you from?" And they said, "We *are* from Haran." This is good news, indeed. Jacob has walked for two months with a map or a GPS, and he's arrived where he was headed. And he said to shepherds, "Do you know Laban, son of Nahor?" And they said, "We know *him*." And he said to them, "Is he well?" And they said, "*He is* well." And then they said, "Now look, Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep."

Rachel is tending her father's sheep. Laban, her father, has two daughters and no sons, so Rachel inherits duties normally reserved for the young men of the family. Jacob lifts his eyes and sees Rachel for the first time. Immediately Jacob is smitten. He wants the other men to get out of there so he can put the moves on her. He says, "Look, *it is* still broad daylight; it is not the time *for* the livestock to be gathered for the night. Give water to the sheep and go, pasture them." In other words, "What's wrong with you slackers. It's the middle of the day. It's not time to be sitting around and gathering the sheep as though it's evening. Water your sheep and get out of here.

Jacob's desire to get the men out of the way backfires, though. They take offense at his implication that they are lazy. They say, "We are not able, until all the flocks are gathered. Then the stone is rolled away from the mouth of the well, and we water the sheep." The shepherds

argue that they have to gather everyone at the well because the stone cover is heavy and requires all the men to remove it. Jacob wants them to leave, but he has inadvertently engaged them in a longer conversation.

But Jacob's fervor is not to be deterred. As soon as Rachel approaches the well, Jacob races to the stone, lifts it away all by himself, waters her sheep—talk about adrenelin! Rachel would have been impressed by Jacob's strength, and even more by his giving a woman shepherd preference, something the shepherds of the day were not known for. But if she is surprised by Jacob, what came next must have shocked her. Jacob took hold of Rachel, kissed her and broke into tears—all this before Jacob and Rachel have even exchanged a word with each other. Luckily for Jacob, Rachel doesn't call the police. Indeed, she went and told her father about Jacob, and Laban came and welcomed him.

Jacob stays a month helping around the place. But then it comes time for a decision. Jacob would leave soon, or a more permanent arrangement would be needed. Laban broaches the subject: "*Just* because you *are* my brother should you work for me for nothing? Tell me what your wage *should be*."

After Jacob's first encounter with Rachel, we can presume that he has been the perfect gentleman. But his ardor has not diminished. Jacob said, "I will serve you seven years for Rachel your younger daughter." And so the deal is sealed. But look closely, Jacob must work the seven years before he gets to marry Rachel. Wow!

In Arab societies even to this day the husband pays for the whole of the wedding. It has echoes of the ancient tradition of the bride price. And here we see again the impact of Jacob's financial state. He has nothing to pay the bride price with except for his time. Thus the text says, "Jacob worked for Rachel seven years." He worked to earn the bride price.

But here's the part I love. Jacob worked for Rachel seven years, but they were as a few days in his eyes because he loved her. Man, talk about patience and delayed gratification!

I love this story. Who can resist romance, the thrill of true love? For now the story settles into a soft and calm place. Jacob and Rachel are betrothed. Jacob is working for Laban, who is glad to have another male around the place. As with all euphoric moments, we can guess that things will become more complicated and difficult once again for Jacob. We won't have to wait long. But what is also true is that Rachel, the love of his life, will be his soul mate throughout. Ultimately, she will bear him two sons, first Joseph, who figures so prominently in the rest of the story, and then Benjamin. Rachel will die in bearing her second son, and Jacob's heart will break. There are many more stories yet to tell about this family, but they will always bear the mark of the love between Jacob and Rachel.

There is something profound about a relationship, a love that puts its mark on one's life. The luckiest of us may have several such people in our lives—a spouse, an aunt or uncle or grandparent, a teacher, or a friend. None of us is an island. We are creatures of the ties that bind. [solicit stories from congregation]