

Jacob is a born trickster, having come out of the womb grasping his twin brother Esau’s heel. They named him well, because Jacob means, “he grabs by the heel,” or “he supplants.” And he’d spend his adolescence pulling out rugs and tripping the ushers at church and planting whoopee cushions at the dinner table. He’s a kind of Huckleberry Finn, convincing all his buddies how fun it is to whitewash the fence. Do you remember Huck duping his friends? He didn’t want to spend all day doing chores. So, his friends come walking by, “Boy, it sure is fun whitewashing this fence!” And they say, “Really, can we try?” Then he’s got half the neighborhood convinced they’re having a great time whitewashing the fence. This is Jacob.

Jacob tricks Esau into selling his birthright on an empty stomach. A birthright was the eldest son’s assumed leadership of the family, and double the amount of inheritance. Esau had been out hunting, was famished, and begs Jacob for “some of that red stuff,” as he called the lentil stew. Jacob holds it back and says, “First promise me your birthright,” and Esau says, “I’m starving to death here, what good is a birthright to me?” He gives up his birthright to Jacob.

Then Jacob and his mother team up on Isaac and Esau. Isaac is near death and virtually blind. He’s ready to bless Esau because his time is short. But while Esau is preparing the meal for Isaac, Rebekah aids and abets Jacob to dress in animal skins, to trick Isaac. Isaac blesses Jacob instead of Esau. Once the blessing is given, the words exist. What’s bound on earth is bound in heaven. They can’t be taken back. And Jacob runs away from home, fearing Esau will kill him when he finds out.

But Jacob meets his match today in uncle Laban. Chicanery runs in the family. And Laban has the upper hand, now that Jacob has fallen head over heels in love with his youngest daughter, the beautiful Rachel. Not that the eldest daughter, Leah, isn’t also pretty. The text says, “She has lovely eyes.” The selfies on her Match.com profile really accentuate her eyes. I’m sure she has a great personality, too. But Jacob swoons over Rachel. At the first sight of her, he kisses her, and weeps aloud—love at first sight. He’s desperate for her, and so promises Laban 7 years of labor. When the 7 years are through, Jacob, all misty-eyed with love, says, “they seemed but a few days.”

Laban throws a party, a wedding feast, to celebrate the occasion. But then unfolds one of the most conniving misdemeanors in all of Scripture. Instead of bringing Rachel to Jacob’s tent to consummate the marriage, he brings Leah. And when morning came, the text says, “It was Leah!” That’s one opaque bridal veil! Oh, the harsh light of morning.

Jacob is crestfallen. He confronts Laban. “What is this you’ve done? Didn’t I work for you all these years?” Laban replies, “Where I’m from, we give the firstborn to be married first. Finish the honeymoon, then you can have Rachel, provided you work for me seven more years.” You really have to look hard in Genesis for family values.

But let’s not gloss over Jacob’s long wait. This part of the story provides no details. All we know from the narrator is that the first seven years of waiting for Rachel seemed to Jacob like a mere few days. But that is *not* how Jacob describes the nature of his servitude to Laban later in

Genesis. Many years into the future, he will become fed up with Laban's hovering cruelty, and he will say, "These 20 years I have been with you...by day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes..." Perhaps the first seven years seemed but a few days. But in the end, Jacob describes an agonizing wait for the simple pleasures of life, a partner, a family, land and livestock, freedom, and a future. In the prime of his life, all Jacob could do was wait.

What's more, as this story begins to unfold in chapter 29, and as Jacob waits for Rachel, there is one character who becomes noticeably absent...God. Up to this point in Genesis, God and the presence and mighty acts of God are consistent and obvious. But for a strikingly long time, the first 30 verses of ch. 29, when Jacob departs for this journey, even before he meets Rachel, God seems to go into hiding. Previously, it's Almighty God this and Lord that, and God said, and the Lord spoke, and so on. God is very near to the characters, in conversation with them, leading them and being present to them. But Jacob, the child of Isaac, the grandson of Abraham, heir of the covenant promise—Jacob is enduring an agonizing wait for God's promises to come to fruition. But God seems, for a while at least, to have gone on holiday.

I bet in this sanctuary today there are a great many people present who are more inclined than others to say, "God is always there for me." For you, God is just "there." You are what we might call God-conscious, God-sensitive, or even God-drunk, or God-haunted. You wouldn't ever consider the possibility that your prayers go unnoticed or unanswered. It would never occur to you that God is not with you always. But there are just as many, I suspect, sitting in our midst today for whom God is naturally "not there." It isn't a matter of belief, or unbelief. It has nothing to do with being saved or not. It is simply the way you see the world. You don't carry with you a sense that God is immediately present to you. God seems distant. You must wait for God. You long for God just as much as the God-haunted. You are like the Psalmist who waits for God even more than the night watchman waits for the sunrise (Ps. 130:6).

Whether we are God-haunted or not, we, like Jacob, cannot avoid the long spells of discipleship that require us to wait for the fulfillment of God's promises. Whether God-haunted or not, there are times when all we can do is wait. I am thinking of some families who must endure the pangs of loneliness as they try to manage distant relationships. The military spouse, the partner away on business, the parent concerned about their child, family circumstances that have led to separation. All they can do is wait. I'm thinking of the person with a very serious diagnosis, whose cure, if there is one, will only come on the other end of a very long wait, requiring a depth of patience they may not know they have. All they can do is wait. I am thinking of the person whose bright faith has since dimmed, who feels like they pray into a vacuum, and for whom church has lately seemed like just one more institution not to be trusted. I am thinking of the prisoners, marking the time, longing for their release, their freedom. All they can do is wait.

What are God's people called to do when all we can do is wait?

We hope. We hope.

But what is the difference between waiting with hope and waiting without hope? To wait without hope is to become the cynic. It is to mistake God's hiddenness for God's abandonment.

It is to zoom in on some pitiful part of your life and say, “Look here, I told you, God doesn’t care!”

But to wait with hope is, as the British preacher W. E. Sangster said, “to have patience with the patience of God.” To wait with hope is to recognize that God is not absent from our sufferings, and not only “mindful” of them, but present to us in the midst of them. We find reasons for hope when we zoom out on our lives, and recognize how gift-laden they are, and how God is at work redeeming the broken places. To wait with hope is to be fueled by that last ounce of blood simmering inside us, the turbulence down where deep calls unto deep, reminding us that indeed God is working to redeem this long wait.

“All things work together for good,” Paul says, “for those who love God and are called according to his purposes.” Notice Paul did not say, “Everything happens for a reason,” but “all things work together for good.” To hope with Jacob is to live in the knowledge that even when God seems far away, we are nevertheless caught up in God’s own history, and God is in all things working together for good...for *good*...for those called according to his purposes. God is at work in the silent rooms and barren stretches and long slogs of our life together. Whether the sun strikes us by day, or the moon by night, God will not let our foot be moved.

To wait with hope is, finally, to wait with the God who waits for us—the God who waits, and works, and waits, and works...to redeem all of Creation, and even to redeem you.