

THE FIRE THAT MOVES US

Sermon given by Dan Phillips

At Caroline Valley Community Church

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Genesis 29:15-28

15 Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" 16 Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. 17 Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. 18 Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." 19 Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." 20 So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. 21 Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." 22 So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. 23 But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. 24 (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) 25 When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" 26 Laban said, "This is not done in our country--giving the younger before the firstborn. 27 Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." 28 Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.

We are in the season of Pentecost in the church year. And for our theme this year, we have adopted the image of fire. Fire is mentioned in the story of Pentecost, and is the most enduring image of this event. As we go through this portion of the church calendar, we are exploring the meaning of fire as metaphor and image, and how it relates to our Christian lives.

Fire often symbolizes passion. It means something that is powerful and alive. Like other forms of life, fire can grow, can reproduce itself, and can move from place to place. It's not really alive, but we can see the similarity between fire and life. And that similarity has led many cultures to see fire as the energy that propels life and that mirrors human passions. We say that somewhat who is passionate is 'fiery'. We talk of people being 'on fire' for God, or for some other reason. We speak of people

who are in love as 'smoldering' with passion. And we will examine what passion means in our existence as both humans and believers.

Fire is also associated with light. Light lets us see things in a different, better way. And passions alter our perception just as light alters our eyesight. Where there is fire, things are looked at differently. We are examining the differences in our spiritual outlook that occur when we become passionate for God and God's ways.

Fire changes things. Fire destroys the old and makes way for the new. Fire eats up the material things that we prize so much, and changes our world, whether we like it or not.

Fire is power. Burning various substances in a controlled way has let us humans do things we could not otherwise do. We burn gasoline to go from place to place. We burn fuel oil, or natural gas, or coal, or wood, to heat our houses. We have harnessed fire to build the civilization we enjoy today.

And fire is ambiguous. Fire can be both good and bad, sometimes at the same time. Fire can produce, and fire can destroy. Fire can light the way, and eat up the forests we need. Fire can take us to new places, and can let us destroy the new places we are taken to. Passions, too, are ambiguous. A love for God can make us bold, and can make us reckless, uncaring.

Passion for the success of God's work can create both a Mother Theresa and a David Koresh. So: fire is passion, is powerful, changes things, creates and destroys, changes our perception, and is ambiguous.

Our text this morning is again a familiar text about Jacob. We looked last week at the story of Jacob and his ladder, his dream about a ladder that reached to heaven. And we learned some things about this man Jacob, whose name meant 'cheater' or 'deceiver'. He had earned this name before he left home. He had to leave home because he had cheated his brother and deceived his father. That's why he winds up in the household of Laban, his uncle.

In our text today, Jacob undergoes a change of behavior. The text read today said that Jacob 'loved' Rachel. This is a first for a man who, as far as we are told, had loved only himself, a man who cheated his own family. Now there is someone else that he loves. And he loves her so much that he agrees to work for seven years to earn her. Most of us would not wait seven years to marry someone, much less work for seven years just to do so. What a love! Jacob has been changed!

So the great, awaited wedding date arrives. And Jacob takes his new bride in to the tent to spend the wedding night.

When he awakes in the morning, he finds that he has married Leah, not Rachel. Jacob is not happy! He storms out to find Laban and demand an explanation. And Laban explains that it is the local custom to marry off the elder daughters first, so Rachel could not be married until Leah was married. Laban goes on to add that if Jacob still wants to marry Rachel, he can work another seven years for her. And to make it easier, Laban will let him go ahead and marry her right away, so long as he promises to work for Laban another seven years. Jacob agrees to this, and thus ends the text.

We note several things in this text. First, Jacob truly loves Rachel, since he wound up working fourteen years for her. Second, Laban cheated Jacob as outrageously as Jacob had cheated his brother and father. Surely someone could have mentioned during the first seven years the local custom that Laban mentions. Maybe there was no such custom, maybe Laban just made it up. But if so, then Leah must have loved Jacob, or at least, greatly envied her sister. At any rate, Laban and Leah conspired to cheat Jacob.

We are also left with some questions. How did they deceive Jacob so thoroughly? Perhaps he got drunk and did not notice, or care, who he spent his wedding night with. Perhaps the local customs prevented him from seeing his bride's face until the

next morning. For whatever reason, he appears to have been deceived.

Why did Laban and Leah do this? Did Laban simply want to marry his elder daughter off, and Jacob was the only man around? Or did Leah want Jacob!? I think it was the latter, and maybe just out of jealousy for her sister. At any rate, the Bible records this is the beginning of a long-running rivalry.

Most importantly for us: why did God let all this happen this way? Is this a punishment for Jacob's earlier crimes? Is God just letting Jacob reap what he had sown? Or is God just looking ahead to Joseph, who needed to get to Egypt someday?

We, looking at the Fire, and Pentecost, need to notice some clear lessons here. First, and foremost, encountering the fire, feeling passion, changes behavior. Jacob's life is changed because he loves Rachel. Our lives are changed by our passions, and by the divine fire that is put into us. The fire comes out in actions: if we feel the fire, it will show in our lives.

And there is justice, though not always the way we expect it. If we had written this story, Jacob would have gotten cheated before he fell in love, and before God had blessed him. We want to separate the bad from the good, and hope that all the bad happens BEFORE we are changed. But that is not what happens to Jacob. He is blessed on his journey, then falls in

love, then is cheated. Life is full of these mixed events. And we do not escape the consequences of our actions, even when we are converted, saved. We just learn to accept that is was our own sin that caused us harm.

And there are consequences to the things we do, always. We cannot escape the results of our actions. May we remember this as we live and work in the name of Jesus. Amen.