

Using the Wait
Genesis 29:15 – 28
Sunday, July 26, 2020

One day back in March at the beginning of quarantine, our oldest son Brandon said, “I want to learn how to play guitar.” We had a spare guitar lying around the house, so I gave it to him, and he started watching videos online. He would come in every now and then to ask me a question about a chord, and then he would go back to his room. After about a week, he was playing “Amazing Grace.” He’s learned a lot of other songs since then. But he used this time of quarantine to learn how to play guitar.

He has also learned how to skateboard. He and one of his friends decided they wanted to do this, so he started practicing every day. He would take his skateboard down in the basement and learn how to do tricks. He would record himself on an iPad and send it to his friend, and his friend would send videos back. I started taking him to the skate park in Radnor on the weekends, and he and his friend would skate there for hours. Over the past couple of months, he has gotten *really good* at skateboarding. He used this time to learn how to do that.

Jen has taken up gardening. She would always be the first one to tell you that she does *not* have a green thumb (in fact she would say she has a *black* thumb and *kills* any plants we try to grow). But a friend built her this really great raised bed garden, and for the past month, she has been growing zucchini and peppers and tomatoes. She has used this time to learn how to garden.

We have both learned how to cook and bake. We always knew how to cook, but we have both really grown in what we can do these past few months. I have made cookies from scratch (I always used boxed mixes before). Jen has baked bread and pretzels and experimented with all

these new recipes. I have made cakes and the best enchiladas you've ever had. We have used this time to become better cooks.

I have talked to a lot of other people who have done similar things. They have taken up drawing or painting or writing, woodworking, sewing, cooking, organizing their houses. They have *used* this time to develop skills that maybe they didn't have before.

I was thinking about that this week as I was reading this story of Jacob. Up to this point, Jacob's story has all happened very quickly. He's born, he steals his brother's birthright, he runs away from home and encounters God in a dream in the wilderness. It's all boom, boom, boom, one thing after another. But we get to the point this week where he meets Rachel, and it's like his life comes to a grinding halt. There's a lot that we could focus on in this story, as he falls in love with one sister but gets tricked into marrying the other sister. But what really stood out to me in this was the *wait*. Jacob works for Laban for seven years in order to marry Rachel. But then after Laban tricks him into marrying *Leah*, Jacob has to work *another* seven years to marry Rachel. *Fourteen years*, the story of Jacob just *stops*. And it makes me wonder what *he* was doing to help the time pass. What new skills did *Jacob* learn? Did he learn how to hunt or garden or become a shepherd? How did *he* grow as a person during this time? How did he *use* his *wait*?

A lot of times we think of waiting as a *passive* activity; just sitting around, not doing anything, until something happens. But what we know about Jacob is that while he was waiting 14 years to marry Rachel, he was *working*. He was *doing something* with this end goal in mind, in preparation for this thing that was coming. And it wasn't just *Jacob* that was working. *God* was working *in Jacob* during these 14 years to transform him. We heard last week, when Jacob has

the dream where God speaks to him, and God says, “Your offspring will be as numerous as the dust of the earth, and all the families of the earth will be blessed in you.” Jacob is the one who *steals* blessings, but now he is going to be the *source* of blessing. God is *doing something* with Jacob – *in* Jacob – transforming him into the person that God needs him to be. Jacob, who was the *trickster*, the *liar* – his name literally means *supplanter*, “one who takes another’s place through force or scheming” – God is in the process of making him a *new person*. And these 14 years of waiting are a part of that.

Jacob has to *learn* some things here. He has tricked his *brother* and his *father*, lied to his family, and so what happens to him here? He *gets* tricked by Laban. Jacob, the second-born son who wants to be first, wants to marry Laban’s second-born daughter instead of the first. Laban says, “That’s not the way we do things here,” and tricks Jacob into marrying Leah. But instead of getting angry and refusing to marry her and running away again, Jacob bears with it. And in the process, he learns *patience*.

It reminds me of the musical *Hamilton*, how it portrays the two characters of Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr. Hamilton is impetuous and just goes after what he wants and does whatever he has to do to get it. But Burr is patient and plays things cautiously and close to the chest. There’s this one song where Aaron Burr sings, “Hamilton doesn’t hesitate, he exhibits no restraint, he takes and he takes and he takes, and he keeps winning anyway,” and that’s Jacob. But Burr says, “If there’s a reason why I’m still alive while everyone who loves me has died, then I’m willing to wait for it.” And he says, “I am the one thing in life I can control.” He can’t control Hamilton, and it drives him crazy. But he can control *himself*. And that helps him to be patient.

Jacob is learning that kind of patience here. There's a saying that we don't just pray for patience and God makes us patient. God gives us *opportunities to become* patient. This is one of those opportunities for Jacob. He has spent the whole first part of his story trying to control *everyone* and *everything* around him. Controlling the order in which he is born. Controlling his brother Esau. Controlling his father Isaac. But he can't control Laban. Instead, he starts learning this lesson that, "I am the one thing in life I can control." And so he spends 14 years working for what he wants. And in the process, God is working on *him*. There's an Old Testament scholar named Kathryn Schifferdecker who says about this story, "Though Jacob is a liar and trickster, God graciously gives him the blessing God gave to Abraham and to Isaac...God is faithful, and God fulfills his promises, even through very flawed human beings...God is working with *this* flawed man to re-make him...All these experiences will help to re-make the shallow young man we first met in Genesis 25 into the father of the nation of Israel."¹ And we'll actually see the culmination of that transformation next week, so stay tuned. But for now, God uses this wait to form Jacob into the person that God is calling him to be.

How is God doing that same thing in *us*? Using *our* wait that, like Jacob's, has been longer than any of us expected it to be. How is God using *this* time to form us, as a church and as individuals, into the people God is calling us to be? How is God using this to teach us *patience*? To teach us to appreciate the friends and family and people around us that we don't realize how much they mean to us until we can't *see* them? To teach us how important it is to worship and practice our faith with a community of people? To teach us how important it is just to *sing* with other people? To *eat* with them? How is God using this time to help us slow down and focus our hearts and minds on the things that *really matter*? On each other.

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=113

You see, it's not just about learning to play guitar or skateboard or bake bread or garden or whatever else we're doing in this time. Those are just the surface expressions of something much deeper that is taking place within us. All of those things take practice and repetition and trial and error and learning and time. *Through* those things, we are opening ourselves up to transformation, to learning and growing and becoming the people that God is calling us to be. Those things are just openings for God to be at work in us, growing in us the fruit of the Spirit that God will use to bless the world – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those are the things that Jacob comes to learn that prepare him for the *next* part of his story, the part after the wait. And those are the things that, by the grace of God, we can learn, too, preparing us for the next part of *our* story, after the wait.