

Living in the Web

Genesis 29:15-28

What do you think of when you hear the word “web”? Do spooky displays of spider webs at Halloween spring to mind? How about dewy spider webs visible on shrubbery in the morning? Maybe climbing into your grandmother’s attic and finding everything encased in ancient spider spinnings? Here are a few other ways to think of the word web.

Since August of 1991, the worldwide web, or simply “The Web” as it is generally known, has been available to the general public via computers, laptops, tablets, and more recently smartphones. We are connected globally through this technological web.

Charlotte’s Web, the story of a pig named Wilbur and his friend Charlotte the spider, and written by E. B. White, has been delighting children and adults since its publication in 1952. I will admit that I cried when I read that Charlotte died in the story.

Although these lines sound like something the Bard of Avon might have written, "Oh! What a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive," they were actually penned by Sir Walter Scott, in his 1808 poem Marmion. Marmion is a story of love, deceit, and treachery, where Marmion first practiced deceit to overcome his rival, yet dies in the end and his rival marries the woman they fought over.

We find reference to webs in the Bible, as well. Job’s friend, Bildad, offers these words of advice: ¹³ Such is the destiny of all who forget God; so perishes the hope of the godless. ¹⁴ What they trust in is fragile; what they rely on is a spider’s web. ¹⁵ They lean on the web, but it gives way; they cling to it, but it does not hold. Job 8:13-15 (NIV2011)

Have you ever leaned into a spider’s web? I have leaned into, walked through, or otherwise accidentally encountered spider webs. And each time I can get about 10 minutes of excellent aerobic exercise out of just a 2-second encounter with a spider’s web.

As you can see, when we speak of webs, there are several things that can come to mind. Our Bible story today tells of a web, the kind that Sir Walter Scott wrote about in his poem. As we follow the story of Jacob, a family history of lies and deception come into clear view.

Jacob had already stolen his brother Esau's birthright when, at his mother's urging, he also stole the blessing meant for Esau from their father, Isaac. At his father's command he traveled to the home of his mother's brother, Laban, there to find a wife.

Find a wife, he did. Jacob fell head over heels in love with Laban's younger daughter, Rachel. Having left home in a hurry to avoid the anger of his brother Esau, Jacob had little to offer in the way of a dowry for the woman he loved. Not to worry. Uncle Laban took pity on his nephew and offered Rachel in exchange for seven years of labor on his farm. Besotted as he was with Rachel, Jacob jumped at the chance to earn the hand of the woman he loved. It has been said that love is blind and, in this case, Jacob apparently could not see that his uncle was taking unfair advantage of him. While the payment of a dowry was common in those days, seven years labor is considered excessive by many commentators, especially when the agreement was between relatives. You would hope that Laban would treat his nephew in a loving manner, but we know otherwise.

Jacob worked for seven years that seemed more like seven days to him, so in love was he. When the seven years were completed, Laban was as good as his word and threw a lavish wedding feast for the lovebirds. Only at the last minute, he switched brides! Imagine Jacob's shock and dismay to find that the woman he married was not the woman he had worked so long and hard to win. And as if those seven years already served weren't enough, Laban wheedles another seven years out of Jacob by promising Rachel after the completion of Leah's wedding week. Laban explained away his trickery by invoking the standard of the first-born, saying that a younger daughter could not marry before her elder sister. How ironic that Jacob, who had perverted the rule of the first-born by

stealing all that his brother Esau was entitled to, should be stung by the same ruling himself.

You might ask why would the saga of the Laban family even find its way into the Bible? Because this story points out that despite human treachery and the failure of human plans, God's providence and continuing care for his people is very real. Jacob's story doesn't play out the way he expected; however, God had a bigger plan in mind.

In the chapter prior to this one, Jacob received a divine message as he traveled to Paddan Aram. In a vision he saw angels ascending and descending a staircase and at the top God appeared and said to him, ¹³ ... "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵ I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Genesis 28:13-15 (NIV2011)

Jacob is remembered as one of the patriarchs of the Bible, despite being a trickster who schemed his way toward the things he desired. Consider it a family curse. His grandfather, Abraham, lied about his relationship with his wife, Sarah, to avoid trouble with Abimelek king of Gerar. Jacob's own sons would later sell their younger brother into slavery and say he was killed by a wild animal. Yet for all the dysfunction in this family, God's purpose was still achieved.

Though unloved, Leah becomes the mother of many of the tribes of Israel while her sister, the much loved Rachel, dies in childbirth having only borne two sons to Jacob. Mistreated by his father-in-law, Laban, Jacob thrives, growing in power and influence,

becoming the worthy father of the future Israelite people. All this despite his selfish uncle's plots against him.

In this story we see the unloved and alien (Leah and Jacob) as the ones who are blessed and at the heart of God's plan. This would suggest to us that it is those in the margins who are always at the heart of God's plans. As God's story advances, we see that it continues to be the downtrodden and unloved who are central in the prophetic messages that will come from the nation created by Leah and Jacob.

In today's story, we see God making a way out of the chaos of human life, out of deception, loveless marriages, sibling rivalries, and family arguments. God is ultimately able to bring order, His order, out of the morass that is humanity. In Jacob's love for Rachel, we see a vision of God's love for us. Jacob's sacrifice of 14 years of labor, made from his love for Rachel, as previously noted, was extravagant. His human love for Rachel, represents God's love for us and foreshadows Jesus' act of sacrificial love on the cross as another part of God's plans for reconciliation with His people.

Today we can feel like we are living in a web, a web of misinformation and drama. Connected globally by the worldwide web, many of us spend hours each day reading what amounts to a cacophony of news stories from the US and around the world. The words of Sir Walter Scott echoing in our heads, make us wonder what we can believe. We feel caught in the web of information surrounding us, squirming to break free as we watch a hungry spider heading in our direction.

Or perhaps, like Jacob and Laban, we find ourselves caught in a web of family drama. With multiple generations interacting with one another, familial expectations and ineffective forms of communication can leave us feeling as if we have been snared in a spider's web. And, again, we can see that hungry spider heading straight for us.

Take heart! The spider will not consume us. Although things might look bleak. Alright, things do look bleak right now! The good news is that God is still in control. His purpose will prosper, even when we can't immediately see the end of things. God will continue to show his love to all people, understanding that His heart is closely aligned with the poor, the unloved, and the unwanted. Archbishop Desmond Tutu is quoted as saying, "This God did not just talk—He acted. He showed himself to be a doing God. Perhaps we might add another point about God—He takes sides. He is not a neutral God. He took the side of the slaves, the oppressed, the victims. He is still the same today, He sides with the poor, the hungry, the oppressed, and the victims of injustice."

What can we do to break out of the web? Align ourselves with God. Just as Jacob served those many years that seemed like an instant to him, if we keep our eyes on God and the promise He holds out for us, these present times will seem like nothing to us. When we answer God's call to reach out to the unloved, the lonely, the oppressed and victims in this world, we will have the opportunity to see God's plan come to fruition. We may have to follow the crooked lines that Pastor Clay referred to last week, but those crooked lines will lead us to the shalom that God intends for his people.

I pray it may be so.

Lynne McMullan Allebach

July 26, 2020 Hatfield Church of the Brethren