

Marilyn Monroe, Beyonce Knowles, George Clooney, Angelina Jolie, Michelle Obama, Tom Cruise, Taye Diggs, and Julia Roberts... What is the one thing that these famous people have in common? They are beautiful. It's all over magazines and it's the talk of afternoon television shows. These people are known world-wide because they stand out for their beauty.

In our Hebrew Scripture today there are two sisters: Leah and Rachel. Rachel was dazzling. The Bible says she was graceful and beautiful. Leah on the other hand was kind of plain and ordinary. The Bible does say that she had lovely eyes, but to me that just sounds like something someone says to feel better about their discomfort or differences. It's sort of like the old Southern adage "bless her heart"—something I add if I want it to sound nice while still offering a snobbish opinion. As in, "that guy is dumb as a box of rocks, bless his heart." Or "she's just a plain, boring girl, God bless her." Anyway, if we had to decide who was going to be on the cover of a magazine, in a Revlon commercial, or sashaying down the catwalk, it would be Rachel, hands-down. Leah would probably go unnoticed; not even in the running. And because of her dazzling, noticeable looks, Jacob fell deeply in love with Rachel. When Jacob asked for her hand in marriage Laban, the girls' father, told him that he must work seven years on the land in order to marry Rachel. Jacob agreed—he would do anything to marry his beloved Rachel. But after the seven years of hard labor on Laban's land, instead of allowing Jacob to marry Rachel, their father tricked him, and forced him to marry his oldest daughter Leah—the plain one. Jacob was angry, but eventually agreed to work for another seven years to marry Rachel also!

How often does the world carnally crave stories of the beautiful, the rich, and the famous? I know that for me it is hard to avoid browsing the Us Weekly or People magazine while waiting in line at the grocery store. Drama and betrayal are eye-catching and distracting, and happy endings are attractive! In this Old Testament version of *The Bachelor* the world cheers on the beautiful couple. Because let us not forget that Jacob was the fair, pretty mama's boy compared to his burly, hairy red-headed brother. So give her the rose, Jacob! Bring on the ring! Bring on the dress and the magazine articles and the Suave commercials. Forget anyone else, we want Jacob

to be in love with Rachel! And after seven years of being stuck with...not Rachel...it's about time.

Now, this is a narrative told about Jacob's experience and viewed through his eyes. But what would happen if we panned the cameras out and took notice of the woman in the back? A lot of times the world avoids talking about the Leahs in stories such as these. It's easy to ignore and sometimes even look down upon people like Leah.

Leah is the invisible player in this story. She is ignored by her husband-- the man who is supposed to be closest to her—by the one she is supposed to trust the most. She was also tossed into this relationship by her father—another person she was supposed to trust. Surely she must think that she has been skipped-over in life in some way. I know if I were Leah, I'd feel unwelcome, unloved, and discarded.

I wonder how many of us have had moments where we felt like Leah. I know I have. Sometimes in my prayers I wonder, God, have you forgotten me? I can't see your face or your goodness. The world is treating me horribly. I feel alone. Unloved. Unseen. Unwanted. Cast aside. And of course there are reasons for feeling this way. Step into any middle school and you'll see that we are conditioned to notice our differences and structure them in such a way that we disregard others. In Episcopal history this week we celebrated the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of women's priestly ordination in the Episcopal Church. Not even a lifetime ago we were leaving behind an entire group of people, disregarding their calls and othering them into namelessness. But even on a personal level my story might be that I was born with a birth defect so my peers reject me or people stare. I'm gay so my parents think I'm going to hell and my friends bailed on me when I came out. I'm unemployed so I feel useless and unwanted. I'm homeless so people dart their eyes. I'm Muslim and I wear a hijab so some think I'm a terrorist. I'm sick or addicted or in pain so people avoid me in their discomfort. These are just several of the many. (&) Sometimes the most painful blows don't come when I feel cast aside, sometimes they come when I am ignored and lonely.

So I have a question for our friend Leah. How do you handle your grief and pain? How do you handle feeling disappointed and alone, Leah? I believe this question is

answered just a few verses after today's lesson. Genesis 29:31-35 says <sup>31</sup> When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren. <sup>32</sup> Leah conceived and bore a son, and she named him Reuben; for she said, "Because the LORD has looked on my affliction; surely now my husband will love me."<sup>33</sup> She conceived again and bore a son, and said, "Because the LORD has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also"; and she named him Simeon. <sup>34</sup> Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, "Now this time my husband will be joined to me, because I have borne him three sons"; therefore he was named Levi. <sup>35</sup> She conceived again and bore a son, and said, "This time I will praise the LORD"; therefore she named him Judah; then she ceased bearing.

Four sons. Reuben: "The Lord has noticed my affliction." Simeon: "The Lord has noticed that I am hated." Levi: "The Lord saw I was lonely and united us." Judah: "I will praise the Lord." If we look at the names she created, we can see a pattern. The Lord noticed her. God noticed.

Leah was alone, and God noticed. She was scared, and God noticed. She felt unloved, and God noticed. She felt frustrated and cast aside, and God noticed. "Unfortunately for Leah, she didn't have the Romans text to read that promises that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God." Yet still, Leah knew that God saw her. God was with her in her pain. And so she praised God.

And we too can praise God today because God notices us in our fear, in our loneliness, in our happiness, in our sorrow, or even in our illness and addictions. God notices and is present: loving us through our pain, sitting with us in our darkness, holding us in our grief and loneliness, catching our tears, blessing them, and whispering to us, "I'm here, I'm here, I'm here, and I'll never leave you." Thanks be to God, for God is here, God helps us, and we are not invisible in God's sight. Amen.