A Primer on Deceit

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

It was a sad day for Baltimore Colts fans when their beloved team skipped town. Colts owner, Robert Irsay, had been deadlocked in a dispute with Baltimore city officials over improvements to Memorial Stadium where the Colts played. The situation turned nasty when the Maryland Senate passed a law allowing the city to seize ownership of the team by reason of eminent domain. Rather than give up control of the team, Irsay quickly closed a deal to move the team to Indianapolis. On a cold and snowy March evening in 1984, a fleet of moving vans pulled up to the headquarters of the Colts to load all the team’s belongings. The 15 moving vans took different routes to Indianapolis so the Maryland State Police could not enforce their new eminent domain law.

The next morning, the residents of Baltimore awoke to the news that their cherished team had relocated to Indianapolis. This clandestine exit came to mind when I read of Jacob’s hasty departure in Genesis 31. Jacob had been matching wits with his Uncle Laban for the better part of twenty years. Laban’s sons are annoyed that Jacob was thinning out their father’s herds and reducing their inheritance (31:1). Laban’s attitude toward his son-in-law “is not what it had been” (31:2). Jacob is beginning to wear out his welcome. He knows it’s time to go home.

As his family hurriedly prepares for their departure, “Rachel steals her father’s household idols” (31:19). We’re not told why she takes her father’s deities. Perhaps they have sentimental value. Maybe she wants them for protection and security.

Laban returns from shearing his sheep to discover Jacob’s deception. He takes off in hot pursuit and catches up with him seven days later. “What have you done?” Laban asks, “You’ve deceived me” (31:26). Well, look who’s talking! Has Laban forgotten that he switched daughters on Jacob at the 11th hour? I tell you, these two men deserve each other.

“Why did you run off secretly and deceive me? Laban asks. “Why didn’t you tell me, so I could send you away with joy and singing to the music of tambourines and lyre?” (31:26-27). His offer of a going-away party seems rather disingenuous. He has no intention of letting them go without a fight.
Laban is warned in a dream not to harm Jacob. So, he resolves to stick it to Jacob by accusing him of stealing his household gods. Jacob refutes this charge and vows to execute the perpetrator of the crime. As readers, we can sense the drama building. We know Rachel to be the guilty culprit and that Jacob has unknowingly passed a death sentence on the woman who holds a special place in his heart.

Laban searches everyone’s tents, including Rachel’s quarters. Rachel conceals her theft with a touch of Jacobean trickery. She sits on his gods. These deities are small enough to fit inside her saddle bag. Rather coyly she says, “Excuse me, father, if I don’t get up, it’s my time of the month” (31:35). Nice save, Rachel!

Laban’s search comes up empty. Now it’s Jacob’s turn to launch into a tirade that has been building for two decades. He regards himself as a model employer. He has assumed liability for all lost and stolen animals. He hasn’t taken anything that doesn’t belong to him. He would have been content to leave empty-handed if God had not intervened.

Laban recognizes their dispute is going nowhere fast, so he proposes a pact: “Come now, let’s make a covenant, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us” (31:44). They erect a heap of stones to commemorate the occasion.

Laban says to Jacob, “May the Lord watch between you and me when we are absent from one another” (31:49). This may seem like a lovely benediction, but don’t be deceived. Laban isn’t wishing Jacob a fond farewell. Laban knows he can’t trust Jacob, so he’s asking God to keep an eye on Jacob. He’s summoning God to serve as a watchman or sentry over Jacob. Laban asks God to keep Jacob under constant surveillance.

We’ve said time and again in this series of sermons: Life is Messy! Life continues its messy progression through this dysfunctional family. Everybody in this story is deceiving somebody.

“Jacob deceived Laban by not telling him that he was running away” (31:20). This verse, literally, translated from the Hebrew, is even more jarring: “Jacob stole Laban’s heart.” Jacob stole Laban’s daughters and grandchildren.

Jacob is not the only one stealing here. In verse 19, we read that “Rachel stole her father’s household gods.” There’s a touch of irony in her stealing. First, she steals these gods. Then she hides them. And later she sits on them, which would have rendered them ceremonially unclean.

Such idols are, in the words of the prophet Jeremiah, nothing more than “Scarecrows in a melon patch. These idols cannot speak. They must be carried because they cannot walk. They
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cannot do any harm; neither can they do any good” (Jeremiah 10:5).

When I was in Confirmation Class and reading the Old Testament for the first time, I couldn’t understand why the Bible made such a big deal of idolatry. This propensity for idol-making didn’t square with my perception of reality. I didn’t know of a single family who kept household deities on hand. It made the Old Testament seem antiquated and detached from real life.

I know better now. American idolatry takes many forms. An idol becomes anything we need, apart from God, to make us happy, satisfied and fulfilled. We can make an idol out of any God-substitute. Success, romance, status, beauty or most anything can achieve idolatrous proportions in our lives. Idolatry is the futile attempt to look to anything else for meaning and purpose apart from God.

Jacob has made an idol of his need to control his environment. We would say that Jacob is a control freak. He exhibits a desperate need to control everything to suit his purposes.

Some of you will see yourselves in Jacob. We exhibit a need to control our circumstances. We hate chaos and uncertainty. We love order and control.

Where is God in this story? God makes two cameo appearances in Genesis 31. God appears first at the outset of the chapter, when God directs Jacob to go home to the land of his ancestors (31:3). God’s promise to Jacob, “I will be with you,” is the identical commitment God gave Jacob in his ladder dream 20 years earlier (28:15). The central promise of God in Scripture is this simple, yet profound declaration, “I will be with you.”

God’s other appearance in the chapter is to Uncle Laban. God comes to Laban in a dream and warns him not to harm Jacob. To this point in the story, there is no record that Laban has any relationship with the God of Scripture. This could explain why Laban doesn’t recount his dream to Jacob by saying that “my God” or “our God” has told me how to treat you. Rather, he says “the God of your father” has revealed these things to me. God can use people who are not fully devoted to him to tell us things we need to know.

Uncle Laban serves a vital role in Jacob’s life. Laban’s presence in Jacob’s life helps him come to terms with his deceit. Jacob has a hard time recognizing deceit in himself. He becomes so adept at deceit that Jacob dupes even himself. God uses Laban to help Jacob come to terms with the disastrous consequences of deceit. This is what deceit looks like, Jacob!

It’s easier to spot deceit in someone else than it is to recognize it in ourselves. Other
It all comes down to forgiveness.

people’s sins and shortcoming are plain to see. I mean, it’s so obvious to us. Why can’t they see these things, also? But deceit in our own lives isn’t nearly so obvious. Maybe we’ve lived with our deceit so long that it has become second nature. God uses other people to show us what our sin looks like.

God tells Jacob that it’s now time to go home. His homecoming will not be heralded with a ticker tape parade. Jacob will be coming home to a brother and a father that he deceived 20 years ago. For all Jacob knows, Esau is still harboring murderous intent. The last thing Jacob wants to do is go home. He would rather die than face his brother. Jacob must face his demons and come to terms with his deceit. Forgiveness is the only way out of this cul-de-sac for Jacob. It all comes down to forgiveness.

The most dramatic lesson in forgiveness in my recent memory occurred after a 2006 shooting in Nickel Mines, Pa. Ten girls, ranging in age from 6-13, were shot execution style in a one-room Amish schoolhouse. Five of the girls died in the shooting. The assailant was known to these girls and their families. Within hours of the shooting, Amish community members visited the widow and the parents of the man who committed this horrific crime. Thirty members of the Amish community attended his funeral and set up a charity to support his family. Expressions of grace from this Amish community transformed this horror into an unimaginable story of forgiveness. You may remember this story. It was widely reported in the national news.

There were commentators who criticized the Amish people for being so quick to forgive, arguing that forgiveness is inappropriate where no remorse is expressed. Some claimed that such forgiveness runs the risk of denying the existence of evil. Amish Christians see it differently. Forgiveness doesn’t excuse the wrong; rather, forgiveness constitutes the first step toward a redemptive future. “Letting go of grudges” is a deeply rooted value in Amish culture. This community of believers takes Jesus’ words about forgiveness very seriously.

Where do you need to extend forgiveness to someone who has wronged you? Is there someone to whom you need to offer an apology? It may be someone in this room or down the street or living miles away from you. It all comes down to forgiveness—extending forgiveness and receiving forgiveness.