

Chapter 2: Rachel

Theme

Remember

Centering Practice

Find a comfortable stance with feet flat on the floor. Close your eyes. Take in a deep breath from the bottom of your feet to the top of your head. Exhaling from the top of your head, through the body, back down into your feet and let the breath flow deep into the ground beneath you. Feel yourself become more grounded as you let go of the stuff you brought with you here today. Let go of your day. Now find your natural breath. Sit with this breath and allow it to bring you into the present moment. As you watch each exhalation and each inhalation let it bring you deeper into this community, and into the presence of God. (Sit for a moment in silence)

Prayer

O, Great Love of our hope and our remembering, we come with our struggles, our joys, our pain, and our delight. Here we find an invisible circle of grace, enfolding and encompassing us. Here, if we are open to you, we can find our place of belonging within it.

Meet us in each present moment. In our remembering bring a healing for the broken past. In our hope provoke us to act for a more whole future. By your love that binds us to this circle. Amen.

Rachel's Story

In the last session, we heard the Biblical story of women who came together to save the Hebrew babies, among them Moses who liberated the Hebrew slaves out of exile.

In this session we are going to sit with the story of Rachel. Her story is woven together with the stories of her sister, Leah; her father, Laban; and her husband, Jacob. It begins with a kiss of endearment in Chapter 29 of Genesis and ends with her death as she gives birth to her second son in Chapter 35. But her story does not end at her tomb at Ephrah. She is remembered through out the Biblical story:

- In Ruth (4:11), along with her sister Leah, she is remembered for building “up the house of Israel.”
- During the Assyrian exile, Rachel is remembered as the classic mother who mourns and intercedes for her children.
- Jeremiah, a century later, remembers Rachel as still grieving and mourning for her children and sees her as intercessor for her children. (31:15-21)
- The Gospel of Matthew, deeply rooted in Judaism, reiterates the prophet, Jeremiah. It's in Matthew 2:18 that we find Rachel remembered again:

*A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and much grieving.
Rachel weeping for her children,
And she did not want to be comforted,
because they are no more.*

- Jewish tradition remembers Rachel as “Mother Rachel” and continues to celebrate her as a powerful intercessor for the people of Israel.

Let’s hear the text for this session...

Genesis 30:1-22

So from this passage we learn that names are important to us as they give us understanding of each other. Our surnames root us in history and family tradition and our given names establish our particular identity. It is a great privilege to name someone or something.

In her book, Katey brings out the importance of naming as a way of remembering someone or something. She starts the chapter with:

“When we name someone or something, we are purposefully creating meaning in our lives. We name what is precious to us: our children, our pets, and sometimes even our possessions like cars. Names signify importance, belonging, and identity.”

Katey goes on in the chapter to tell a beautiful story of receiving the name Kathryn from her grandmother who she named “Honey” and of the special gift of an American Girl doll named Samantha. When Katey gave birth to her own daughter, she remembered her grandmother by giving her baby girl the first name Samantha and the middle name Kathryn.

The passage just read is full of names and their meaning and symbolism. In Jewish tradition, the act of naming brought honor to God, the bestower of the name, and to those named. Also, a child’s name was revealed in the same ceremony in which they were circumcised. Which makes you wonder where that left the baby girls? Considering this naming ritual, is it any surprise the number of women we find in the Bible who are unnamed?

Breakout Session/Small Group Discussion

Question for discussion: What is the origin and significance of your name to you and to those who named you?

Reporting Out

Have the groups report on their small group discussion as time allows.

Let’s continue the story...

Genesis 35:16-21

As a way of expanding our understanding of this passage, we are going to do an exercise of Visio Divina. Many of you are familiar with the use of Lectio Divina or spiritual readings for prayer but instead of using the word, this form of prayer uses visual elements to help set our minds on prayer. It allows God to speak into our hearts through image.

Link for the image, *Death of Rachel* by Gustav Ferdinand Metz

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1bMDQdXbgK_QJLUmccOdyGZ--384ukpeO/view?usp=sharing

You will be led through this practice:

Begin by closing your eyes, breathe, clear your mind and ask God to enter into this time of prayer with you. Ask God to speak to you through this image.

Open your eyes and look at the image. Let your eyes pause and focus on the part of the image they're first drawn to.

Gaze upon just that part of the image for a moment or two. Close your eyes, still seeing that part of the image in your mind.

Open your eyes and now look upon the whole image. Gaze upon all the image, allowing it to draw forth a word, an emotion, or an image in your heart. You can journal your observations or just sit in reflection. What do you hear God whispering into your heart? What thoughts or questions is this image raising? What emotions do you feel?

Sit with these questions for a few moments. Ring a bell to close this time of reflection.

If there is time, ask a few to share their observations.

Social Issue

Consider the effects that maternal mortality has on the children and their families left without their mother. The World Health Organization reports that newborns are at 46X at greater risk of dying before one month of age. And longitudinal studies consistently show that surviving children are at higher risk for traumatic syndromes, depression, decreased nutrition, under-schooling which leaves them victim to the cycle of poverty, living in lower socio-economic status, and fragmented families just to name a few of the outcomes. Often the survivors are left with huge debt due to hospital bills. Katey writes—“Complications from childbirth are the number one cause of death for women of child-bearing age in the developing world” (pp.49-50). She goes on to say—“I often refer to this high rate of maternal mortality as a moral tragedy because saving women’s lives in childbirth does not depend on us discovering a cure. We already know what we need to do to prevent many of these deaths...We may not be able to stop every single maternal death from happening, but there’s a lot more we can do to make childbirth safer for everyone” (p. 50).

The dangers of childbirth are not just a problem in developing countries. In fact, the maternal morbidity rate is going down in every region around the world except North America. You will find on the United Methodist WOrmen’s website (<https://www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/mchealth>), since 2000, the maternal mortality rate in the U.S. has increased 26.4%—the only developed country whose numbers did not decline. The U.S. is now ranked 47th out of 183 countries in maternal mortality.

Breaking it down even more, the Center for Disease Control reports that Black women are 3 to 4 times more likely to die during or after delivery than white women. For Black women rates remain higher even for those in higher socio-economic levels. For white women in poverty, while not as great a risk as found for Black women, there is still a far greater risk for them than for white women at higher socio-economic levels.

Anna Langer, Professor of Public Health and Coordinator of Harvard's Women and Health Initiative states that "maternal mortality in the U.S. receives scant attention, in part because there are relatively few deaths each year compared with other conditions, and also because there are no important business opportunities related to conditions that don't require sophisticated drugs and technologies." But she suggests an additional reason: "Women—particularly those who are most vulnerable due to race, age, or socioeconomic status receive less attention overall for their health issues compared to men."

As Katey put it, maternal mortality is a moral tragedy when we can decrease risk simply through education and support during pre/post pregnancy; health modalities such as controlling blood pressure, asthma, Type 2 Diabetes; changes to hospital policies that currently lead to obstetrical hemorrhages, infections, and unnecessary C-sections; public health policies for better housing and access to healthy food, health care availability including mental health, and paid leave. The list goes on.

Women's and children's health have always been a high priority for United Methodist Women it remains one of areas of focus. One of the resources I will share with you following this session is from the United Methodist Women website which many of you are already familiar with but I hope that those who are new to UMW will take time to visit the site and learn about ways you can be involved in the effort to make childbirth safer for women and their babies.

Breakout Sessions/Small Group Discussions

Question to be discussed: Maternal death is far too common for women on the margins. How can we remember them, hear them, and respond to the suffering?

Reporting Out

Have the groups report on their small group discussion as time allows.

Closing

Rachel's story is tragic as are the stories of the many women and families who suffer such loss. Rachel gives voice to anger, humiliation, and pain. We may feel that suffering, too, as we grapple with personal and societal pain which is always part of our Lenten journey. As we lean into this Lenten season, we remember Jesus as he taught us, to be human is to experience grief. He showed us how to make space in our communities for the suffering by hearing the cries for help, sorrow, anger, pain and protest. To be as Jesus, we are asked to walk along side of the women who are at risk, witness for them, join our voices with them, even march in the streets if so called. To be with them as the midwife who tended to Rachel. And so, let's remember Rachel and her cries of lament and remember, too, that out of lament comes hope. Genuine hope cannot be separated from the experience of suffering as we always learn from our life's experience. Because we are free to grieve and lament the injustice in our world, we are free to praise with full joy.

Let us end this session with a prayer in the form of the poem, *Rough Translation* by Jan Richardson from *Circle of Grace*.

Par' elpida ep' elpidi.

—Romans 4.18, Greek New Testament
(Literally, “Against hope with hope.”)

Rough Translation

Hope nonetheless.

Hope despite.

Hope regardless.

Hope still.

Hope where we had ceased to hope.

Hope amid what threatens hope.

Hope with those who feed our hope.

Hope beyond what we had hoped.

Hope that draws us past our limits.

Hope that defies expectations.

Hope that questions what we have known.

Hope that makes a way where there is none.

Hope that takes us past our fear.

Hope that calls us into life.

Hope that holds us beyond death.

Hope that blesses those to come.

This session was created by Beth Vanoli.