

## **Ash Wednesday**

### **The Genesis of Joseph**

**Text: Genesis 30:22–24**

Ten weeks ago, we celebrated the birth of a baby—a Savior who is Christ the Lord. Angels sang about his birth. Shepherds scampered to his manger. Wise Men sought and found him. Conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, Jesus came to save his people from their sins. And in response, we all sang, “Joy to the world!” That’s how it’s supposed to be whenever a baby is born. It’s a happy, joy-filled occasion—a cause for celebration.

But tonight, we begin a Lenten journey with Joseph. And the beginning of this journey is utterly joyless. Joseph’s mother, Rachel, wasn’t yet a mother, and it appeared that she might never be a mother. Babies were being born left and right, but not for Rachel.

You remember Rachel? It was love at first sight when Jacob first spied the beautiful young shepherdess watering her father’s flock. Jacob worked seven years for Rachel, only to be deceived by his father-in-law, Laban, into marrying Rachel’s sister, Leah. Jacob got to marry Rachel too, but at the cost

of another seven years of labor.

Jacob and Rachel were finally together as husband and wife. First came love. Then, eventually, came marriage. But there were no babies born to Rachel. Her sister, Leah, had babies, and lots of them, six sons and one daughter. In addition, Rachel's maidservant and Leah's maidservant each gave birth to two more sons for Jacob. Eventually, eleven babies had been born to Jacob through three separate women before even one was born to Rachel.

Needless to say, these births brought no joy to Rachel. In fact, these births were a source of strife and jealousy for Rachel. Each newborn's first cry of life caused a toxic mix of anger and sorrow to well up in Rachel. Each and every baby not born to her was a bitter reminder to beautiful Rachel of her barrenness—a terrible token of what she didn't have: a baby of her own to have and to hold.

Rachel's childlessness was more than just a procreation problem; it was a spiritual problem, a faith problem. Children are a gift from the Lord, and Rachel hadn't received that gift. It was a source of shame and emotional

distress. Did it signal the Lord's displeasure with her? Was the Lord testing her faith? Why did her most heartfelt prayers seem to go unanswered? Why did she feel so forsaken by the Lord?

So, Rachel tried to take matters into her own hands. Rachel herself gave her maid to Jacob, thinking that her maid, Bilhah, could have children whom Rachel could count as her own.

This is where our lives intersect with Rachel's life. We all probably know someone who struggled with infertility and the heartbreak it can bring. But we all struggle with faith. We don't have to be in the business of childbirth to share in the sin of Rachel and Jacob. We all know how painful it can be when our heartfelt prayers go unanswered. We all know how endless the wait can seem for those who wait for the Lord, when the hoped-for healing doesn't come. We all know the tragic progression from sadness to bitterness, and from bitterness to anger, and from anger to despair. In desperation, we might take matters into our own hands. We stitch together our own sinful solutions, setting God's will aside to secure the relief we crave. We'd rather ignore the Lord's will than wait for the Lord. And in the end, we are often left

with a sin-filled situation like Rachel's, a dysfunctional debacle fueled by faithless desperation.

But two words from tonight's text changed everything: God remembered.

**"God remembered Rachel"** (v 22). When all hope had dried up and faith was just dimly flickering, God remembered. God listened to her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son—and not just any son. That birth was the genesis of Joseph—the beginning of a journey that would ultimately deliver God's people and point all the way to Jesus.

God remembered Rachel. But in the lexicon of the Bible, remembering is more than mere recollection. When God remembers, he acts. He intervenes. And this is all grace. For tonight we see how God acts and works not just for the well-behaved who wait patiently in faith. God remembered Rachel in her shameful striving. God remembered Rachel in her sin and desperation. God remembers those who feel forgotten and forsaken. Why? Because "he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (Joel 2:13).

God remembered Rachel; and she gave birth to a son. She joyfully named

the boy Joseph. That son signaled the end of Rachel's shame and desperation. He was a reminder of God's remembrance (and Rachel's deliverance). The name Joseph means "may he add." Choosing that name was a confession of faith and a prayer of hope. In joyful expectation, Rachel exclaimed, "May the Lord add to me another son!" (v 24).

"Another son" is why you have come here today. God remembered Rachel with Joseph; but God has remembered you with another Son—his only beloved Son, Jesus. When God remembers, he takes action. And God has acted definitively for you in the person of his Son. In that Son is the end of your shame and desperation. In that Son is your deliverance from sin and death. In that Son, God remembers the forgotten. That Son, Jesus, was forsaken on the cross so that God will never forsake you. God has remembered you; God has acted on your behalf, for your eternal good, in his Son, Jesus, the Christ.

These forty days of Lent are always a time of remembering for us. We will remember our sins and confess them—recounting all the ways that we have wandered from God's will, rejected his commandments, and refused to wait

on him in faith. We will also remember the people and places of our Lord's Passion: Judas's betrayal, Peter's denial, and Pilate's pandering. We will also remember Rachel's son Joseph: how his brothers betrayed him, how his faith was challenged, and all the ways he foreshadows God's own Son, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

But the heart of this holy season is not our remembering, but God's. God remembered Rachel. God remembered Joseph. And in his beloved Son, God remembers you. In Jesus, God is acting on your behalf. He remembers you right here, in the preaching of his promises, in the cleansing cadence of Holy Absolution, in the life-giving splash of Holy Baptism, in the bread that is his body and the wine that is his blood. Here God remembers you in his Son, in the power of his Holy Spirit. Here the power of his Passion is applied to you personally: forgiveness for your sin and deliverance from disaster, including those of our own making.

“‘Yet even now,’ declares the Lord, ‘return to me with all your heart’” (Joel 2:12). That invitation from the prophet Joel always goes out on Ash Wednesday. Return to the Lord. Look to him in faith because he is gracious

and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. You can hear that love in those three little words: “Yet even now.” Those three words deliver a whole mouthful of grace: “Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me.” Even now—even after you’ve followed Rachel’s lead and made your life into a dysfunctional debacle, even now that you’ve burned your bridges and hardened your heart and hurt the people God has given you to love—God says, “yet even now” it’s not too late. Yet even now he wants you back. Now is the time of God’s favor. Now is the day of salvation. Yet even now the Lord comes. He remembers you, delivers you, rescues and saves you in his holy Son.

So tonight, you and I begin a Lenten journey with Joseph. And our journey, like Joseph’s journey begins with God’s remembering.

Amen.