"What is Normal?"
Genesis 29:15-28

This is not a good story.

What are we even supposed to learn? I’ve heard poor takes on this passage and maybe you’ve heard them too.

“Be like Jacob and continue to persevere even when you are wronged.”

“Be like Jacob and don’t stop until you get what is yours.”

“Find a love like Jacob and Rachel’s—Jacob loved Rachel so much he worked for 14 years and had to marry Leah before he could marry his beloved Rachel.”

Even the scholars and commentators who devote their lives to studying biblical stories just like this one come up short.

“In this story, we finally see the great deceiver, Jacob, get deceived.”

“There’s so much humor in this story. Jacob wakes up the morning after his wedding and realizes the woman he married is not whom he intended to marry!”

It’s true, Jacob is finally deceived. Jacob, the one who tricked his father, who could not see, into giving him his older brother’s birthright, is tricked by his apparent inability to not see he was marrying Leah instead of Rachel. While commentators may see humor in this and the argument could be made for the humor in this passage, I just don’t see it.

This is not a funny story. This is not a story for us to learn to persevere like Jacob. This is not a story of some great love. This is not a story for us to give a great “HA!” at Jacob finally getting what’s coming to him.

My guess is we have all heard this story many times before, and if we haven’t heard this specific story, we’ve heard stories like it. So much so that we’ve become desensitized to it and likely don’t even think twice about everything that happens when we hear it. We don’t think about the two women who are
treated as nothing more than property. Leah is merely a pawn to trick Jacob and lives a pretty miserable existence after her marriage to him. And the portion of the story that we read today only mentions that Zilpah, Laban’s maid, was given to Leah as a maid. We don’t hear the rest of the story where Leah gives Zilpah and Rachel gives her maid Bilhah to Jacob to have children, just as Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham.

We don’t think about any of these things when we read this story because we’ve heard it or stories like it so many times before. This story has become normal. It’s what happened a long, long time ago and we accept it as totally normal even though it is far from it.

A couple weeks ago, I had a Zoom call to record a Wednesday “This is My Story” with Amanda Mintz. Amanda is a member of Ithaka Sunday school class and works with our youth. And let me tell you, the Spirit was a-moving during that call, revealing the Word in a new way as the Spirit so often does.

Amanda introduced me to Sonya Renee Taylor, a Black author, poet and activist. Taylor founded a digital media and education company called The Body is Not an Apology. It promotes radical self-love and body empowerment as the foundational tool for social justice and global transformation.

At the beginning of April, just a few weeks into life during coronavirus, practically everyone in the world was clamoring for a return to normal pre-coronavirus (which we are all still hoping for now, four months later). Sonya Renee Taylor said this, “We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature.”

“Normal never was.”

Our story today is not normal other than we normalized all of the things that happen in it, because that’s just the way things were back then. Women were property; they were
bought in marriage for a price that roughly equaled fourteen years’ worth of work. Handmaids (or let’s call them what they were—slaves) were given to their mistresses’ husbands to bear children. But that’s just the way it was then; they didn’t know any better. Right?

Margaret Atwood’s 1986 novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, gained popularity once again a few years ago with the television series adaptation streaming on Hulu. It seemed like everyone and their mother was both reading and watching *The Handmaid’s Tale*, at least that was the case for me and my mother. In the book, Atwood writes about a radicalized conservative Christian regime that has rebelled and overtaken the United States, renaming it Gilead. In Gilead, women have no rights, their bodies are not their own but instead belong to their husbands or to their closest male relative. The book centers on Offred, the handmaid. Her name is Offred because she is “of Fred.” There is a fertility crisis in Gilead; there are very few people, specifically women, who can reproduce. So all of the fertile women in Gilead, unless they are already married to a commander, are rounded up and forced to serve as handmaids to the commanders and their wives. They are forced to bear their children.

It’s terrifying to think about this happening. And you might say that there is no reason to be terrified of something like Gilead happening because it never would; that would never be allowed to happen. But here’s the thing: it already has. Margaret Atwood has said that she hasn’t written anything that hasn’t already happened. The biblical precedent in this story for the use of handmaids is the story of Jacob, Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah. Every month in a ritual called “the ceremony,” this is the Bible story that is read before the commander uses the handmaid as a tool for reproduction.

In response to people who have said “this would never happen now” or “this would never happen here,” Margaret Atwood writes, “*It can’t happen here* [cannot] be depended on: anything could happen anywhere, given the circumstances.” When things like our story today are normalized, when things like greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion,
extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack (to use Sonya Renee Taylor’s words) are normalized; anything could happen anywhere, given the circumstances: slavery, Jim Crow, voter suppression, same-sex couples denied the right to marry, black men murdered by police officers, mass incarceration, climate change, parents and their children fighting in the same unjust war, sexual harassment and assault, a pandemic killing minority and low income populations at much higher rates than white populations, and the list could go on and on and on.

So what do we do? What do we do when we come across Bible stories like ours today that have been so normalized for us that we don’t think twice about them and the pain and harm they hold?

Here’s the thing about the Bible: the stories in it and the people in them are not perfect. You can see from our story today and many other stories in it that very dark things have happened. These stories are not in the Bible for us to normalize them. They are not there for us to say, “Well, that’s just how things were then. They didn’t know any better.”

God doesn’t want us to see these stories as normal and keep moving. These stories are in the Bible for us to be stopped in our tracks and shaken by them, for us to be disturbed, and for us then to be moved to action to ensure that things like this do not happen again. God is trying to tell a better story, shaking us out of the monotony of acceptance of the way things are or always have been. God is calling us to the abnormal, to new life, life for every body.

Last week, civil rights leader and congressman, John Lewis, died. John Lewis spent his life fighting against what was normal. He was one of the original Freedom Riders, who were determined to ride from Washington, D.C. to New Orleans in an integrated fashion because it was normal for states to continue to enforce laws prohibiting black and white folks from sitting next to each other. He was one of the key organizers of the 1963 March on Washington, because it was normal and legal for black people to be denied civil and economic rights. In 1965 he marched, was beaten, and arrested in Selma, Alabama on
what has become known as Bloody Sunday, because racial discrimination in voting was normal and John Lewis continued to fight against racial discrimination in voting until his death. These are but a few components to a life spent pushing for the abnormal, for life and rights for all people.

In June of 2018, John Lewis tweeted, “Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.”

The struggle John Lewis is talking about is the struggle against what our world has normalized. Greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack have been normalized in our world and we can’t accept it. We can’t accept the story of Jacob, Rachel and Leah as normal. That is not what God is calling us to. God is calling us to speak up and out against these things, to fight for what is abnormal in our world:

Generosity instead of greed.

Equity instead of inequity.

Plenty instead of lack.

Connection instead of disconnection.

Love instead of hate.

This is how we stitch a new garment, one that fits all of humanity and nature. This is good and necessary trouble.

Sure, this new garment may be abnormal for our world, but when has God’s way ever been normal? Amen.