

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, July 23, 2017
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Genesis 28:10-21; Psalm 139-1-12
“The Inescapable God”

Dishonesty, trickery, revenge, threats of murder, births, deaths, birthrights, and blessings. It sounds like an episode from Coronation Street on BBC. It's not. It is a story from the Book of Genesis- Jacob's story. Our episode starts at the birth of Esau and Jacob. 'Twins' cried the midwife as she pried Jacob's hand from Esau's heel. The Lord has already been at work in Rebekah's womb setting the stage for God's purposes as the creator informs the reader that 'the elder shall serve the younger.'(Gen. 25:23). The deception of Jacob robbing Esau of his birthright and blessing from their blind, elderly father Isaac, starts in the womb. Furious, Esau vows to kill Jacob which explains why Jacob high tails out of Beer-Sheba and after trekking in the Wilderness of Paran stops as the daylight is overcome with darkness, arriving at a certain place and stays the night. Setting up camp, he removes one of the stones from an abandoned ancient shrine and lays his head on it. This shrine has lost its meaning in the world as it lays empty of long forgotten ceremonies; but, its holiness is renewed on this night by the God of Abraham and Isaac as the Lord sets in place his mission.

The storyteller utters Jacob's exterior motives; he's a successful man of power and prestige even though he is exiled from home, family and community. A man who learned to seize blessings and to take risks from infancy. He is not seeking the Lord. There is no mention of any relationship.

Jacob is in this in-between place where nothing is expected to happen except sleep and breakfast. In the morning when the sun lifts its head above the clouds he will continue heading to Uncle Laban's community to seek a wife and fortune.

After pillowing the stone he drifts asleep and dreams. Jacob is about to meet the Lord in full dramatic splendor with angels travelling to and fro between heaven and earth by way of a stairway.

He dreams of God speaking. God promising. God actually renewing a promise made to Jacob's parents, Rebekah and Isaac, and his grandparents, long gone now, Sarah and Abraham. He must have heard the Abrahamic blessing 'I will make you a great nation, I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing' (Gen. 12:2). But that is immaterial right now. He has other important problems on his mind.

Dreams are a funny thing. Dreams are, in a way, the opposite of imagination, because while we can control our imagination, we cannot control our dreams. They can seem so real; so exact. There is a moment when you wake from a dream and you're not exactly sure where you are or where the boundary is between the dream and reality.

Jacob awakes to the dark and quiet. Nothing is moving; but, the desert wind, and the first light of a new dawn on the horizon (1 John 1:7).

God's promise resonates within him.

I will be with you. I will keep you wherever you go. I will bring you home.

Jacob is frightened!

This vision has shattered the presumed world Jacob currently lives in.

He is out of control of his destiny. He has made assumptions that God is in heaven or in a tabernacle or in the sky somewhere. He assumes that his life, dreadful as it is at this moment, is of no interest to God. If God is paying any attention to him, Jacob must be in big trouble. But Jacob's assumptions are misleading.

The narrative shatters our belief, our assumption that only good people are blessed by God. But here in a Mesopotamian shrine, where fear and deception and material goods mean little, a miracle of grand proportions has happened. God Almighty binds to this dishonest man.

It is a shocking element of the story and the shock is we can't believe this is happening.

If we continue to read Jacob's story, we learn that Jacob meets his match with Uncle Laban who swindles Jacob out of fourteen years of labour for the marriage of not one daughter but two. We learn that Jacob wrestled with God at Penial to be blessed again; but, not before Jacob's hip socket is put out of joint. He is no longer called Jacob but 'Israel' for he has seen God face to face and has struggled with God and with humans' (Gen 32:22-31).

Jacob is a scoundrel and he always will be a scoundrel. But there is a twist to this story.

He is wanted by God.

Let us not think for one moment that Jacob is not the man God is looking for. God was waiting for the right time to overcome Jacob's demeanor; to get his undivided attention. The spiritual reign of God is upon Jacob as he witnesses God's divine activity of angels travelling to and fro and God standing over him. God is alive and has an active role with Jacob on earth. God has him right under his thumb in this remote place. God has a job for Jacob and God engraves his promise right where it hurts—on his heart and says, "I am not finished with you yet, Jacob "and if you give me half a chance I will bring you home."

I think it's safe to assume that Jacob probably asked himself the same questions we ask about him, and its questions we might ask ourselves at times when we make grave mistakes.

Lord, do you love me just as I am?

Will I be redeemed by the grace of God?

When we see Jacob in this situation as a scoundrel and know that he is about to be redeemed by the Lord, suddenly we realize that our name can be substituted for Jacob.

Suddenly we realize we can be redeemed. For we are Abraham, Isaac and Jacob's people; we are the offspring like the dust of the earth, spreading west and east and north and south. We are included in the ancient promise of building God's kingdom, of witnessing that God is active in our lives and our world.

The rest of Jacob's life was lived with that reality of God who was with him, who would never let him go, a God bigger than any of our imaginations, our dreams, or our wants.

That's what our faith is about ultimately: a God who appears in unlikely and unexpected ways; a God who shows up when we are running away from whatever it is we are trying to escape—

our jobs, what our life has become, our parents, our marriage, our intimate relationships, our guilt, our own betrayals, our fears and anxieties.

Our faith is about a God who comes into the messiness and secretiveness of our own lives.

I am convinced that God is not finished with any of us, just like God was not finished with Jacob. Even when we cannot imagine what it is like for us to be faithful, God can.

To paraphrase the words of John M. Buchanan, retired pastor of 4th Presbyterian Church, Chicago; our faith is about a God who challenges our reason, challenges our logical understanding of God, and challenges our theology, who comes to us in unexpected times and places. A God who, in the fullness of time, will come into human history in the most unexpected of ways—in the birth of a child in Bethlehem; in the life of that man who lived among us, in the death and resurrection of that man who makes good the ancient promise.

The old promise becomes our promise as Jesus says, ‘You are my own; you are forgiven; and I need you to do my work in the world.’

Amen.