

## How Awesome is This Place!

Genesis 28:10-19      Crossroads Christian Church

Romans 8:12-25      July 20, 2014 Pentecost 6A

People who don't read much of their Bibles sometimes assume that it's full of plastic saints whom God likes—people who are virtuous, upright, moral, obedient, and dull, and plastic sinners who God doesn't like, who end up getting smited—or smote.

But as we explored the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs, starting with Abraham and Sarah, we find that even these ancient people are more complicated, and more interesting, than we ever thought. Sarah was loved by God; yet in her jealousy and insecurity she twisted Abraham's arm to send Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert alone, maybe to die. Abraham was loved by God; yet he gave into Sarah on this, and he twice passed Sarah off as his sister to foreign kings because he was afraid that they would have him killed so they could have Sarah for their harems.

We heard 2 weeks ago how Abraham sent a servant to bring a wife home to Isaac. Rebekah married Isaac and after having trouble with infertility, prayed to God for help and she ended up being pregnant with twins. The firstborn, Esau, would stand to inherit the family fortune; but the younger twin grabbed at his brother's heel as if to try to pull him back into the womb, so they called him Jacob, which means Grabber. Esau the hunter became Isaac's favorite; but Rebekah was a wily woman who helped her favorite, Jacob, trick Esau into giving Jacob his birthright, and then trick Isaac into giving Jacob the blessing that should have gone to Esau.

The novelist Frederick Buechner describes Jacob like this: "The book of Genesis makes no attempt to conceal the fact that Jacob was, among other things, a crook. What's more, you get the feeling that whoever wrote up his seamy adventures got a real kick out of them....But then one day he

learned a marvelous lesson in a marvelous and unexpected way.”<sup>i</sup> (unquote)

Not your usual plastic saint, huh? Jacob was the kind of guy who could see what he wanted and then find a way to go and take it. Esau was strong physically, but just lived from day to day. Jacob was strong mentally, and had a strong will, and could see the longer view. He was always angling, always maneuvering. Today he'd be a hedge fund manager or a dot com entrepreneur. When Esau came back hungry from an unsuccessful hunt, Jacob saw a way to take an advantage, and convinced Esau to sell his birthright—his double inheritance for being the firstborn son—for a bowl of stew. Esau wasn't the brightest bulb in the family chandelier, you see. And then, with his mother Rebekah's help, he saw a way to trick his blind dad, by impersonating his older brother, into getting the blessing that would normally go the firstborn. So by being a smooth operator, he completely upset the structure of the whole family, and came out on top—in theory. But in real life, he had upset Esau, too, and Esau wasn't going to take lightly being cheated twice. He and his mother Rebekah agreed that a strategic retreat was necessary. It was time to get out of Dodge. Officially, he was following the same pattern as his father, in going back to the old home place to look for a bride. Abraham had arranged finding a bride for Isaac, but now it seemed like a good idea for Jacob to go himself—and stay away, if he knew what was good for him. But Jacob knew that in becoming the biggest winner in the family, he stood in grave peril of being the biggest loser—by losing his life.

So Jacob slowly made his way from Beersheba, in what is now southern Israel to Haran in the north, knowing that he had all the time in the world. It was like he was following Abraham and Sarah's journey in reverse. Did he reflect upon that as he trudged along? Did he remember the stories of his grandfather's call to follow God to a promised land? Did he

remember the story of how God had tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his beloved son? How would that story sound from Isaac's perspective? And where was he in the covenant story, the agreement that God had made with Abraham and had renewed with Jacob's father Isaac? Would God come to him, too? Mile upon slow mile he traveled.

Night was drawing near. Jacob laid down to rest, pulling up a stone for a pillow. Somewhere in the night came a dream. And Jacob, who before had only seen opportunities and advantages, now saw something quite different—a revelation of God's nearness. Near him was a ladder that reached into the sky.

Esther Menn, an Old Testament professor at Lutheran School of Theology, describes it like this. "His dream discloses the hidden yet active presence of God at this chance stop along the way. God's ongoing engagement in the world and in Jacob's disrupted life is portrayed through a striking vision of stairs reaching from earth to heaven. This structure recalls the stepped ziggurat or mud-brick mountain uniting heaven and earth prominent in Mesopotamian cities such as Babylon, a city whose name means "gate of the gods." In Genesis God appears not to royalty or priests, but to a terrified refugee.

A Jacob on the move encounters a vision full of movement. Divine errand runners continually ascend and descend to do God's work in the world. Only the LORD appears stationed at the apex ... Jacob is startled to recognize this place of God's indwelling as holy ground, as "the house of God" (the Hebrew meaning of "Bethel") and "the gate of heaven". Consecrating his rock pillow as a commemorative pillar, Jacob fittingly names what will become the major Israelite shrine of Bethel."ii (unquote)

In the dream, unlike in the spiritual we sing, Jacob doesn't climb the ladder. Rather, angels go up and down the steps between heaven and earth. And God speaks from the

top of the ladder, and extends the covenant from Abraham and Isaac to Jacob. What he had tried to take, God was freely giving. God said, "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will become like the dust of the earth; you will spread out to the west, east, north, and south. Every family of earth will be blessed because of you and your descendants. I am with you now, I will protect you everywhere you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done everything that I have promised you."<sup>iii</sup>

In response, Jacob was filled with terror and awe, and said, "How awesome is this place." He saw God's holiness right there in front of him. The next morning he set up a stone as an altar, and he named it Bethel, God's House, which became a shrine for future generations of Israelites. He asked God for protection on his journey, and promised to be faithful to him.

Jacob learned to see things in a different way. Where before he only saw things in terms of threats and opportunities, and people in terms of the advantage he could have over them, now he saw a world touched with the holiness of God. He saw holiness touch the created world around him. He realized that God had more in mind for him than he ever thought possible. He realized that although he was alone and lonely ever since he had snuck out of his father's camp, he was not alone—the God of his family was with him. He saw things in a new way.

In Romans 8, Paul talks about the Spirit that leads us away from the pathways of death and onto the pathways of life; it is the spirit that allows us to call God Abba—daddy—and fully realize that we are God's sons and daughters. It's the Spirit that helps us through the painful transitions of life

toward new creations—just like Jacob had discovered is relationship with God at Bethel.

Think about moments in your life when you saw things in a new way. Maybe you were overwhelmed by beauty in a natural setting or in a painting or in a person's face. Maybe the stories that you had heard about Jesus suddenly clicked and you felt for the first time like you knew him personally. Maybe you suddenly realized the depth of someone else's love for you; or your love for another person. These are holy moments that we can cherish. Open your eyes. Look around. See. And you can realize, like Jacob, how awesome life can be as a blessed child of God. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

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<sup>i</sup> Frederick Buechner, Weekly Sermon Illustration: Jacob, frederickbuechner.com.

<sup>ii</sup> Esther Menn, Commentary on Genesis 28, The Working Preacher.org.

<sup>iii</sup> Genesis 28:13-15