

JACOB'S DREAM

Pastor Hubert, July 23, 2017 (Genesis 28:10-19)



So, what do you do if you have cheated your older brother out of his birthright, and then tricked your blind and dying father into giving *you* the blessing also reserved for the oldest son? And what do you do when find out that your very ticked-off brother is looking kill you? So what do you do? Well, you ask mom! Then follow her advice and run for the

hills, don't even think about saying goodbye. That was the situation Jacob found himself in, and it was the result of his own greedy selfishness (and with some so-called help from his dear mother!).

Jacob had gotten himself into one fine mess and had to get outta there faster than you can say lentil soup. He didn't have a GPS or even a map, so when darkness fell, he had to stop to spend the night some place. Seems he had to pack so quickly, he forgot to bring a pillow, so he used a rock.

I don't know what I might dream if I had a rock for a pillow, but Jacob dreamed of a ladder stretching to the heavens and angels going up and down, and get this: God standing right there, telling him he is blessed – blessed, of all things!

Jacob was Isaac's son and Abraham's grandson. Of course Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are the three famous fathers at the very beginning of the people of Israel, God's people. But if you think that this illustrious trio were each honest, holy men you're about to be disappointed!

Jacob was a not a nice guy. He was a trickster, a man who took full advantage of any opportunity to gain the upper hand at the expense of others, in this case at the expense of his own brother, Esau.

We think of God connecting with special people; not regular folks and certainly not charlatans and shysters. However, here in the Bible, the God of heaven and earth comes calling on the most unlikely people, like Jacob. And not only that, God promises him great blessing and that he will *be* a blessing to all others. Yes, we're talking about the same Jacob here, an opportunistic liar and cheater who has no moral compass, who isn't much of a blessing to others, and as a result is now on the lam to save his skin.

So lesson one of this story: God likes to work through losers, has-beens and cheaters. People we would give up on and never pick on our team. God has a long history of doing that; the stories of Moses, Jonah and king David are cases in point, and later Jesus' own disciples, a bunch of illiterate, ignorant loose cannons at first.

We tend to think that as Christians we are special people through whom God works. True enough. But God also work through people who have no relationship with God whatsoever, like Jacob for whom God wasn't really on the radar.

I wish I could tell you that Jacob had a remarkable conversion and was a transformed man after this powerful experience, living a holy life ever after; but that is not the case. In fact, Jacob continues in his shifty ways, not knowing a gift when he sees one, continuing trying to make clever deals with people *and* God. Even so, what Jacob dreamt that night so long ago has become an enduring image for people of faith ever since. It's a good reminder that God doesn't need Christians to further God's vision for creation; it's us Christians who need God (and creation).

Which brings me to lesson number two, which is: God is right here, and has been all the time, even when you thought God wasn't. But as it so often goes, Jacob needed a big crisis in his life to bring that message home. He was on the run, leaving most of his belongings behind. His sneaky ways had cost him not only his brother, but his father and his mother, cost him everything he had known and owned up to this point in his life. The text never mentions that he saw his family ever again. He had lost everything, and at this point in the story chances are he might lose his life, too.

Jacob doesn't really know where he's headed or what to expect. Only a short time ago he was on top of his game – and now he's on the lam, running for his life. It's getting dark and he needs to find a place to sleep. I imagine it wasn't a very a deep sleep, having to keep one ear and one eye open for thieves and bandits, or for mercenaries hired by his brother to execute revenge.

What he receives that night is a powerful vision: that famous ladder to heaven with angels going up and down, and God talking directly to him, blessing him. When the vision is over and Jacob awakes, refreshed, in awe and breathless, his conclusion is, "Surely the Lord is in this place – *and I wasn't even aware of it.*" God was there, and he had no idea. Just let that sink in for a moment...

Doesn't that sound like something we might say, too? Too often we are storming through life, trying to stay ahead of whatever is chasing us – our hectic schedule, our age, our past, a family conflict, our own anxiety, our to-do lists – and we forget to stop, we forget to reflect on what we're doing and where we're headed and why.

We grumble about the mess our world is in and wonder why God isn't doing something about it – yet we completely miss the subtle messages that God has been sending us all along: messages coming in the people we meet and the wisdom they bring, in a piece of music that touches your soul, in those uncanny coincidences that keep popping up, in someone calling just when you needed it, in the smile of a total stranger, in that arm over your shoulder, in someone saying just what you needed to hear, in someone offering you a shoulder to cry on. That's where God is, in those moments when you feel carried – and sometimes also challenged.

We are so busy and so distracted (and only getting busier and more distracted), we forget that God is in this place – not just this “church place” but *any* place. Any place can be an opening to the divine, as Jacob realized that night.

Any place: your front porch, a truck stop, the grocery store, a waiting room, the Farmers’ Market, on the plane, when you sleep at night – any place. “God’s stairway” is always there; but like Jacob, it often takes a crisis for us for that dime to finally drop, that moment you realize you’re about to lose it all...

Friends of ours, a husband-and-wife couple who are not associated with any church, told us once how just such a crisis hit them when she developed an aggressive form of cancer. They flew to Toronto where she was to receive a mix of chemo and radiation therapy. The morning her treatment was to begin, they walked from their hotel room to the hospital, using the connecting underground tunnel. They knew that as of that very moment, their lives would change forever – and they were scared to death. But as they were traversing that long, cold tunnel all by themselves, something strange happened. They felt surrounded by light and love. Their fears fell away, and they realized that whatever was going to happen, it would be alright. It took a crisis for them to realize they were not alone and never had been. And did you notice I said they weren’t Christians? That’s how God works.

So maybe there’s a third lesson here, and that is: slow down, stop running. Quit being so preoccupied all the time by your fears, hopes and expectations, your to-do lists. Allow God to break through as God did with Jacob (and our friends in that tunnel), and maybe like Jacob your socks will also be knocked off by God’s presence, a presence that has always been there right from the start – and you had no idea, because you were too busy and distracted.

And one more thing: when you *do* become aware of God’s presence, say thanks to God. Just stop and say thanks. And if it’s a “Jacob moment” that just knocks your socks off, take time to celebrate and mark that moment. Jacob did it by pouring olive oil over the stone, by anointing it and by giving it a special name. That was the way in those days to mark an important place or person. So find *your* way to mark an important “God moment” when they happen in your life.

That’s why here at Pinegrove we start many of our meetings by sharing our “God moments”, moments when we sensed God’s presence and say thanks for them.

And at the beginning of each Sunday service we have that same opportunity, to share what we celebrate, and that doesn’t have to be limited to birthdays and anniversaries. As people of faith we should also celebrate when we notice God active in our lives, and share that with our faith family. If we don’t do that in church, where *do* we do it?

The point is, you take time to slow down, to think back to the day or the week that passed, and to feel around where God was and is. It may feel a little awkward at

first, but I guarantee it gets easier as you go along; and before you know, it comes naturally.

God has a long track record of working with some pretty unqualified people, and Jesus did the same thing. So I'm pretty sure that if Jacob worked out fine for God, you will too.

Amen!

Genesis 28:10-19 (Jacob's dream)

¹⁰ Meanwhile, Jacob left Beersheba and traveled toward Haran. ¹¹ At sundown he arrived at a good place to set up camp and stopped there for the night. Jacob found a stone to rest his head against and lay down to sleep. ¹² As he slept, he dreamed of a stairway that reached from the earth up to heaven. And he saw the angels of God going up and down the stairway.

¹³ At the top of the stairway stood the LORD, and he said, "I am the LORD, the God of your grandfather Abraham, and the God of your father, Isaac. The ground you are lying on belongs to you. I am giving it to you and your descendants. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth! They will spread out in all directions—to the west and the east, to the north and the south. And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants. ¹⁵ What's more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you."

¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I wasn't even aware of it!" ¹⁷ But he was also afraid and said, "What an awesome place this is! It is none other than the house of God, the very gateway to heaven!"

¹⁸ The next morning Jacob got up very early. He took the stone he had rested his head against, and he set it upright as a memorial pillar. Then he poured olive oil over it. ¹⁹ He named that place Bethel (which means "house of God"), although it was previously called Luz.