

Genesis 28:10-19a
God is in this Place
WRCoB 10.10.21

Let's face it, Jacob was a crook.

Actually, he and his mother, Rebekah, were both crooks!

Twice he cheated his brother Esau
The second time with his mother's
Assistance and insistence

The first time, Jacob had a pot of chili
Slowly cooking over the fire
And a pan of corn bread in the oven.

Esau came in from outside, cold, wet, tired, and hungry
And smelled that chili and corn bread
And said woo wee, hot diggity-dog
That sure smells good

"Let me have some of that, like right now!"

Scheming Jacob says to Esau, "Ok, sell me your birthright"

Esau replied, "whatever!"

Jacob cheated his brother out of his birthright
For a bowl of chili and a piece of corn bread.

The second time, Jacob duped his poor father
Who at the time was blind, feeble and near death.

His mother, Rebekah actually set this one up.

She had Jacob dress up like Esau
With his outdoor flannel shirt and blue jeans

And placed animal skins over his arms
Because Esau was exceptionally hairy

This was so his father would think he was Esau.

Jacob went into to his dying father's room
And his father blessed him as the first born
Rather than his older brother.

Later on, when Esau went to receive his blessing
He learned his father had already blessed Jacob

And since Isaac could not take back his blessing
Esau vowed that if he did nothing else in life
He'd kill his brother Jacob.

Rebekah hears this and warns Jacob.

Genesis 27:42 Your brother is consoling himself with the thought of killing you.

This brings us to Chapter 28.

Jacob is running for his life to his Uncle Laban's
A 400-mile journey on foot.

We catch up to Jacob alone in the wilderness.

It's dark and Jacob finds a place to lie down
And with a stone for a pillow falls asleep.

We mightn't have slept a wink
What with a rock for a pillow
A mind full of worries
And a guilty conscience.

But Jacob sleeps like a baby.

And in his sleep he dreams a dream
That forever changes him.

In his dream he sees a ladder
Extending from the ground all the way into heaven.

Angels were ascending and descending
And God stood at the very top.

God says to Jacob

Genesis 28:13-14 NLT

¹³ "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.

So what else is new?

Jacob had heard these old promises before.

From his father, Isaac

And from his grandfather, Abraham.

And what good were they?

He couldn't eat promises

He couldn't use them as collateral

It wouldn't protect him from the wrath of Esau.

They weren't much of any use.

Empty promises from an elusive God

His ancestors claimed existed.

His mother had taught him well.

If you really want to get ahead in life

You grab the bull by the horns

Like he'd done with Esau.

~~

But hold on.

There was something else God said.

Genesis 28:15

¹⁵ What's more, I am with you, and will watch over you

~~

"I am with you" is a promise repeated many times.

God said it to Moses (Ex. 3:12)

God said it to Joshua (Joshua 1:5)

God said it to Gideon (Judges 6:16)
God said it to Isaiah (Isaiah 41:10)
And to Jeremiah (Jer. 30:11)

And God promises it in Jesus.

But Jacob hears it for the first time.

Strange, I would say!

Here was Jacob running for his life
After swindling his brother
And shaming his family.

And rather than be punished for his misdeeds
God blesses him!

I mean, that's God for you.

Just when you think you've got God figured out
That you are punished for wrongdoing
And awarded for being good

God goes and does something like this.

No wonder Jacob's wakes up proclaiming
Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.

Before leaving, Jacob takes the rock he used as a pillow
Stacks it on other rocks to form a pillar
Anoints it with oil

And renames the place Bethel, *The House of God*.

He pledges that from here on out
Everything he does he will do for God.

~~

In the wilderness Jacob encounters God for the first time.

He had heard of God through his parents and grandparents.

Heard their stories of God's mighty works
Heard again and again of God's promises.

But never before had Jacob felt God's presence.

What Jacob experienced out under the stars
At the place he renames Bethel
Is his spiritual birth, baptism by the Holy Spirit.

Jacob would never be the same again.

Well, he'd make mistakes again
We all do.

Like his mother, Rebekah, before him
Who favored Jacob over his brother Esau

Jacob ended up favoring his son, Joseph
Over against Jacob's other sons.

But no question about it, Jacob was different.
For he met God face-to-face.

Jacob's story becomes a part
Of the larger redemptive story of God
As recorded in the Holy Scriptures.

But it's a story potentially of each of us.

When, in times of despair and fear
When we don't know which way to turn
And to whom to turn to . . .

When we flee for our lives from our own demons.

When all we have is a rock for a pillar
And a heart full of brokenness.

When we really need the assurance
That God is with us
We encounter God face-to-face

~~

Lucky for Jacob, crook as he was, God loved him.

And that's today's lesson.
Lucky for us, crooks as we are, God loves us.

Frederick Buechner writes that God doesn't love people
Because of who they are
But because of who God is.

It's all a part of what is defined as Grace.

the spontaneous, unmerited gift of the divine favor in the salvation of sinners, and the divine influence operating in individuals for their regeneration and sanctification.

Grace is revealed in Jesus Christ
In his life, ministry, death and resurrection.
And present with us through God's Holy Spirit.

But Grace is found throughout Scripture
From the Old to the New Testament.

We also see so many examples of God's grace.

We've seen it when God made clothes
For Adam and Eve to wear
To hide their nakedness.

We've seen it in God marking Cain
With some kind of protector from revenge
For killing his brother Abel.

We've seen it when God spares Noah and his family
When God calls Abraham
When God reaffirms his call to Isaac

And now we see it
As Jacob receives God's blessings.

For it is by grace
Jacob not only becomes the father
Of the 12 tribes of Israel
But a grandfather of Jesus

Jesus becomes the face of God
And our encounter with him
Becomes the place we call Bethel.

Jesus is this Gate of Heaven Jacob speaks of.

So that we too might one day exclaim
Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know.

There is something so important in this.

That God is present, reassuring, encouraging
Comforting, uplifting and ultimately saving.

Knowing God is very present with us
Empowers us in ways nothing else can.

The presence of God sustains people
Through all kinds of tragedy and trouble

And assures us of the promise
That whatever happens
God will never leave nor forsakes us

This is God's great gift of grace.

~~

Dallas Willard writes an endearing story
Of a little boy whose mom died.

It was especially hard for the little boy at bedtime.

That was when he felt his mother's absence the most.

He'd come into his father's room
And ask if he could sleep with him.

But even then, he could not rest until he knew
Not only that he was with his father
But that his father's face was turned toward him.

Father, is your face turned toward me now?

*Yes, you are not alone.
I am with you. My face is turned toward you.*

When the boy was assured of this, he could rest.

The greatest gift God can give us
Is the assurance of his presence
In life, as well as in death.

As long as we know God is there
With his face turned toward us
We can bear up under any load.

And so, whether you sleep with a rock for a pillow
Or are nestled beneath the covers of your parents' bed

May the God of Grace turn his face towards you
Giving peace and strength for your journey.

Numbers 6:24-26 - The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.

Amen.