

July 19, 2020
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Genesis 28:10-19a
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Messy Life

Genesis 28:10-19a

New Revised Standard Version

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel.

I love the book of Genesis. There are so many scandalous stories of messy lives, especially with Jacob's story. There is fighting, deception, and estrangement. He is a trickster who does his best to watch out for himself and to always get what he wants when he wants it. We understand someone like that. We might even recognize ourselves in someone like that.

Jacob and his twin brother wrestled for dominance even in the womb. Esau was born first, but Jacob grasped onto his brother's heel. They grow up and they are still wrestling for dominance. Jacob wouldn't settle for being the younger son who could not claim the birthright or the blessing so he tricked his older brother Esau when he was vulnerable and starving to give him the first-born birthright for a taste of stew. And then, with his mother's help, Jacob deceives his blind father Isaac into giving the paternal blessing on him when Isaac mistakenly thought Jacob was Esau and pronounced the blessing without knowing the truth. All of Jacob's deception did not sit well with Esau, and he grew determined to take his revenge. Their mother Rebekah knew that Esau's anger burned hot and she decided to help Jacob escape by providing a cover story about Jacob's need to find a wife.

It was all of that deception, that fighting for dominance, that determination to get what he wanted when he wanted it no matter what he had to do or whom he had to hurt, that led Jacob to where he is today - this lonely place of wilderness where he is a fugitive from his own family. Jacob is tired, scared, and fleeing for his life. Jacob was in that frame of mind when he found himself in an unnamed place needing to rest so he took a stone for his pillow, and fell asleep.

We don't hear any of the boring parts about Jacob's life. We don't hear about the times when he and his brother played together down by the creek. We don't hear about bedtime stories and doing chores. We only get the exciting bits. It reminds me of the 24 hour news cycle when you long to hear a story about a regular person doing regular things like mowing the lawn or waiting in traffic.

We hear the story of someone who has used all of the people in his life to get what he wants. We hear the story of someone who has given up on any hope that he could be someone other than a user. Do you know anyone like that? There might be someone in your family whose life has been filled with deception and manipulation and they have abandoned the idea that their life could have any hope for a different kind of future. It might even be you. It's like we see the distance between the person we are and the person God created us to be and we throw up our hands and sit down because we are too tired and too angry to make that journey to close the gap.

Jacob is right there. He is too tired and too angry, so he stops, finds a stone for his pillow, lays down, and tries to escape the destructive reality he has created for himself. In Jacob's day people believed dreams were not when we worked out stress or anxiety. Dreams weren't when we wrestled with subconscious fears. In Jacob's day, it was believed that dreams were when actual encounters with God took place. When Jacob talks about his dream later, he talks about God appearing before him, he doesn't talk about a dream. When Jacob wakes up, he doesn't speak of God's presence in his dream; he speaks of God's presence in this place. The dream isn't simply a mental world, but an actual world that can be slept on, touched, and built on.

I love that Jacob is asleep when he has this encounter with God. It helps me remember that God is always with us, and that God is always pursuing us – even when we are asleep! Jacob isn't in control when he is asleep, he isn't looking for God, but God is with him. Jacob sees this ladder, better translated as a stairway or ramp, extending from earth to heaven. The angels are going up and going down but we aren't ever told why. God speaks, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Jacob wakes up exclaiming, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!"

Jacob found peace there and called it Bethel, which means the house of God. He was lifted out of the wilderness, and taken out of his estrangement, his isolation, that space of deception and manipulation. He experienced God in that place and remembered that God was standing there with him in the middle of all that mess he had created. God was still loving him, still claiming him, still promising presence and homecoming. God is with us in our messy lives.

After everything that Jacob had done, all the ways that he had deceived and tricked, God still showed up. Nowhere up until this point in his life do we hear Jacob refer to God or acknowledge God's existence in his life, and God still shows up. Jacob came into that deserted place fleeing for his life, without any promise or hope for a full future. Jacob woke up trusting that with God his life could be transformed. Jacob was ready to trust the new reality discovered in his dream more than he trusted his old reality of fear and guilt.

I was listening to NPR's Code Switch podcast titled, "Why Now, White People" the other day. They were talking about how our human brains love the status quo, even if the status quo is not helpful or beneficial. We don't like the interruption of our routine. Quarantine and lock down are imposed on us. They are interruptions of our routines. They aren't voluntary. We are afraid and frustrated of so many things. We have a lack of trust of government and authority. We complain about the way our boss has responded to coronavirus. We complain about how our school systems have responded to coronavirus. We rally around having a common enemy. We have shared grievances. We are people in similar situations and that uniting factor gives us a shared identity and a shared purpose. They talked about how we have shared intensity. You can have strong feelings but when people around you have strong feelings too, that feeds into each other because there is safety in numbers. The more people who are upset about something alongside you, then being outspoken or unruly doesn't stand out. If everyone is speaking out about Black Lives Matter, then everything is collectivized. We also have more anonymity now because everyone is wearing masks.

They talked about how pandemics supercharge protest energy. Throughout history there have been plagues, quarantines, riots. So many throughout history. Unrest then riot. In Moscow 1771, much of city was placed under quarantine after an outbreak of plague. There was civil unrest and riots. In the 1800s there were 6 different cholera pandemics around the world and at least 70 riots associated with those outbreaks. In Milwaukee in 1894 there was a smallpox

outbreak. The city went under lockdown, and there was unrest and riots. In 2014 there was the Ebola outbreak in the capital of Liberia. 70,000 people woke up one morning and basically found themselves blockaded in. It was a poor area of town. They created buffer zones and check points. You had scared people and a disease that people didn't understand. People's outrage didn't erupt until a government official who was in the blockaded area was escorted out. Then people took to the streets. They saw someone being extracted which was an injustice because it said we are going to prioritize this person's safety and health over everyone else's.

We want to think that white people woke up and suddenly cared about the lives of Black people, but there has been a building effect of increased exposure and more engagement. The shared anger of the collective really means something right now, but anger is hard to sustain for a long time. When we go back to our regular lives and go back to our regular jobs, will we still be angry? Will we still want to fight racism?¹

We know that transformation sometimes is a two steps forward, one step back kind of a thing and that was true for Jacob. Jacob didn't give up all of his old ways. He still tried to bargain with God. He still tended to think of himself first and others second. None of us ever get it right. None of us ever live fully as who we are created to be. And yet, like Jacob, none of us get what we deserve either, and in the end, there is only mercy and forgiveness, moments of peace, and the promise of homecoming. God still shows up and will keep showing up for us all.

May God open our eyes to see God here among us. Imagine if we can give God our anger, free ourselves from that anger and see others and ourselves through the eyes of God's mercy and forgiveness. By the grace of God, may it be so, Amen.

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/16/878963732/why-now-white-people>