

“JACOB’S LADDER”

Genesis 28:10-22

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Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins
Westminster Presbyterian Church

As we have been revisiting favorite Sunday School stories this summer, I’ve been reminded about one of the most common approaches to teaching the Bible to children – what I might call the “heroes of the Bible” perspective. It’s been big in the age of Bible-story cartoons, to appeal to kids who love superhero movies, but it was also very much a part of the Sunday School experience when I was growing up, and I expect many of you are familiar with it as well. The idea is that we teach and learn stories of people in the Bible – the “heroes of the faith” – so we can imitate their good qualities, behave like them, be strong like them, believe like them, learn from them how to obey and please God, and eventually be blessed like them.

Well, there are several problems with that approach, and the biggest one becomes readily apparent when you delve a bit into the stories of some of these Bible “heroes.” He’s not the only one, but Jacob is possibly the prime example: It turns out, when you look more closely at him, that Jacob is *not* a hero but a rascal (to put it nicely). He’s smart and persistent and resilient, but he’s also selfish, dishonest, and sneaky. And I wouldn’t advise emulating him unless what you want is to divide your family and make one of your siblings angry enough to want to kill you.

That’s what came before the story we read today. Jacob, who was the younger son, with the help of his mother, tricked his elderly and blind father Isaac into giving *him* the paternal blessing that was supposed to be given to his older twin brother Esau. There is so much cultural distance between us and this story that it’s hard to fully grasp the significance of this - why there could be only one blessing, the power it was understood to convey, how it made Jacob the next patriarch of the family line. It’s hard to understand why the blessing – which is certainly meant to include the promises of God to his grandparents Abraham and Sarah – is still “real” even when obtained by deceit. But we certainly understand the dysfunctional family dynamics and we can appreciate the seriousness of the deception and the betrayal.

So Jacob is a fugitive from trouble of his own making. That’s why he’s on the road and sleeping on the rough ground in the middle of nowhere with a stone for a pillow. As far as we can tell, he’s all alone. The place he stops doesn’t even seem to have a name.

But in this place, Jacob has a most amazing dream. It’s a great scene, which I picture as one of those old-time Hollywood movie musical extravaganzas with chorus lines of dancers in glittery feathery costumes strutting down the stairs. Artists love this story, because it offers so many beautiful visual possibilities, and many of them have painted it, envisioning it in different ways.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests that we should probably be picturing a ziggurat – one of those Mesopotamian temples built of earth with steps going up the side, into the sky. And on the steps, angels - messengers of God - coming down and going up again. It's one of the most iconic images scripture gives us: a visual linking of earth and heaven. Now, in the cold light of day, in the nitty-gritty of difficult relationships and the struggle for survival, it doesn't look like there *is* much connection between heaven and earth. Jacob's life up to this point certainly doesn't demonstrate a connection. But this dream image asserts a different reality (as does the cross, in Christian perspective, but that's another part of the story).

Now, we don't know what was on Jacob's mind as he lay down to sleep: Fear? Anxiety about the future? Guilt? Regret? Excitement for a new adventure? Loneliness? We aren't told but it seems pretty clear that what's *not* on his mind is the possibility of a religious experience. "Wow, God was here and I didn't know it," he says afterwards - which makes me want to remind him that he didn't seem very aware of God's presence anywhere else, either.

What I want you to take note of here is not only that Jacob isn't a hero or an admirable character; also he has done *nothing* to seek out this encounter with God. Like many other people in the Bible, it is in a lonely, wilderness place that he has this spiritual experience. But Jacob's story has no hint of pilgrimage, of seeking, of being led by the Spirit of God. He's just trying to save his own skin. He's not praying out there in the wilderness, not worshipping, listening, pondering the meaning of life or asking God any questions; he's asleep. The initiative is all with God. Jacob is completely unqualified to be a Bible hero, and, moreover, he has evidenced little interest in God's ways. And yet... And yet, God speaks to him.

God reiterates all the promises of the blessing and all the promises previously given to Abraham and to Isaac: land, offspring, and God's presence wherever he goes, to protect him and bring him back home. Why *Jacob*, of all people, should get to experience this extraordinary dream and be the keeper of all these promises is beyond me. It is certainly nothing to do with deserving.

Again, we discover that, despite all our efforts to make it something else, the story of the Bible is all about God's inscrutable grace and God's purposes. God, it seems, will not be manipulated or thwarted, neither by human conventions about who is important (such as firstborn sons or powerful leaders) nor by human unworthiness, nor by anybody's attempt to take control of the story. It's God's story, not Jacob's, not ours.

And that brings us back to the Sunday School lesson: as tempting as it is to look for heroes to imitate (or for our children to imitate), that's not what the Bible offers us. The Bible offers us deeply flawed (and sometimes not even very likeable) human beings, who are, for some inexplicable reason, befriended and companioned by God – loved, chosen, used, blessed. This offends us, in our readiness to classify people as the "deserving" or "undeserving," and I guess that's why we try to make the Bible into a

book of morality lessons. But when we do that, we distort the story; we try to make it our story rather than God's story.

Often, of course, the flawed men and women of the Bible are changed as they are claimed and called. Jacob will be too, to some extent. Eventually. But the last part of the chapter we read today gives us a clue that Jacob isn't going to easily let go of his desire to be the master of his own destiny. Yes, he is deeply touched by his dream and by the encounter with God and the promises God makes to him. He now sees this middle-of-nowhere place as holy ground. He gives it a name, Beth-el (which means "house of God") and even sets up a historical marker. And because it's what people do when they have met God, he makes a vow of faithfulness to God. It is heartfelt and genuine – at least, it comes across that way to me. But this is Jacob, and even after what has transpired, he's not about to just turn his whole life over to God. His declaration of faith is full of "if's." "*If* God will be with me, *if* God will take care of me on my travels, *if* God will give me food and clothes, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, *then* the Lord shall be my God."

It might not be quite whole-hearted yielding to God's claim on his life. There's not a word of repentance. And Jacob is a long way yet from a readiness to truly change his ways. Soon he'll become part of his uncle's household, where he'll continue to concoct schemes to benefit himself (though he'll also find that he's not the only one who can pull off a deception). There will be more dysfunctional relationships. It will be a long, long time before he is reconciled to his brother. But Jacob knows now that he belongs to God. He knows that God is not as far away as he once might have believed. Not everything has changed, but some things have. And the story will go on, and God will be present and at work, in spite of Jacob.

Isn't that the way it is? We are unaware of God's grace, and then we are washed in it, and then we pull away from it. We embrace it and then we resist it. We trust it and then we are skeptical of it; we want to make a deal with it and then we find that it is changing us. In spite of ourselves. But that's the story.

It's not about being heroes; it's not even about being good people. It's about being called and claimed by the inexplicable grace of a God who loves us in spite of ourselves. We are part of a bigger story and God is nearer to us than we know. Who knows when God might surprise us with a glimpse of something just as unexpected as a staircase full of angels? Just to remind us that we are not alone. Just to let us see that wherever we are on our journey, God is there. Just to show us that the distance between our reality and God's can be bridged - thanks be to God.

Resources:

Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation Commentary), John Knox Press, 1982.