

Sermon for Sunday, July 20, 2014 Genesis 28:10-19a "Climbing Up and Down"

Imagine, if you will, a family in a soap opera. Two brothers, in competition for their father's favor and inheritance. One a favorite of the mother, one a favorite of the father. And one breaks the rules to get what he wants, by hook or by crook. Sibling rivalry taken to an extreme.

It's an old story. Old as Cain and Abel, where Cain kills Abel because he is jealous that his father prefers Abel's leg of lamb to his roasted vegetables. Two brothers in competition, and one does something bad to the other.

And so it is with two brothers who are grandsons of the great patriarch Abraham. Twins. Competitors. One is favored but governed by his animal instincts. One is not favored but uses his cleverness to trick the first into giving him what he wants.

It may have been an old pattern with them when they were children, where the one learned he could get what he wanted from the other by offering him a short-term pleasure...a toy, a piece of fruit, a bird, an extra shirt.

And as adults, Jacob, the second born, once again tricked his brother Esau. Not for a little thing. No, this was a big thing. The inheritance. The whole ball of wax. All for a bowl of lentil stew. And remarkably, at a later point, their mother helped Jacob in the bait and switch. Esau went out to hunt for some food for his father, and while he was gone, Jacob, abetted by his mother Rebekah, covered his arms with an animal pelt so he seemed as hairy as his brother, and went to his blind father to receive the blessing – the inheritance. The ruse worked, and when Esau found out, he was enraged.

To save his life, Jacob went on the run. This was presumably a trip to find a wife from among his cousins, but it was as much an escape from his brother's wrath.

The venal, greedy jealous trickster was on the run.

And this is the journey he is on when we rejoin his story this morning in the reading from Genesis. He is out in the middle of nowhere, a place so remote that it doesn't have a name. He's alone. He's traveling light – no backpack, little in the way of supplies. Why else would he use a stone as a pillow? Not the most comfortable place to lay one's head.

And perhaps he is restless in his sleep that night...

...and so he sleeps and dreams. A strange dream, to be sure. A ladder, more appropriately described as a ramp or a series of stairsteps like the jagged side of a pyramid, a ziggurat. And there are creatures, divine creatures, going up and down the steps between heaven and earth. Messengers of God are going up and down. We call them angels, but the notion of angels is something that comes to the Bible much later. These are, for our purposes, merely messengers between the divine and the earthly. Our sleeping dreams, too, are the in-between land between heaven and earth, the place where messages from God are delivered. Sometimes the messages are clear. Sometimes they are in a code of sorts, and take some figuring out to determine what the divine message is.

But Jacob seems unconcerned with meanings. He is more focused on the fact that God has communicated with him via a dream. God has not abandoned him, outraged by his behavior. No, God is talking to him in the dream. Perhaps this mess that Jacob has created can be salvaged somehow.

Because then the Lord actually speaks to Jacob in the dream. No second-hand messages from those divine creatures. No, Jacob is hearing the word from the Lord directly.

Now if we had done some of the stuff that Jacob has done, the things that caused grief to his mother, enraged his brother, and deeply troubled his father, the last person we would want to be in conversation with is God. We'd be worried that God would smite us for our bad behavior.

But God does no such thing. Not even "that's all in the past, don't worry about it." God simply ignores the earthly mess and looks forward to the future. God makes a promise.

We've heard promises before, right? God's promise to Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation? God's promise to Rebekah that she would have children?

And once again, there is a promise about fertility, both in progeny and in lands, but there is even more in this promise: God promises protection – “I am with you and I will guard you” – and continued companionship – “I will bring you back.” Three promises in one: accompaniment, protection, homecoming, on top of the renewal of God’s original promise to Abraham that this family will grow beyond belief.

Sort of suprising. It might feel to us like God is actually rewarding Jacob’s bad behavior, but something else seems to be going on.

What happens next?

Jacob wakes up, and he’s frightened. He’s not rejoicing about the promises, he’s shaking in his boots. What’s that about?

Imagine you’re the kid who stole your sister’s favorite sweatshirt and your sister is going to beat you up, or at the very least, go tell mom about it.

You’re nervous. Then suddenly mom shows up and says, “We’re taking you to King’s Dominion this afternoon. You can pick one friend to take with you.” You’re shocked. You expected to get a time-out, or to get grounded or something, and instead mom says, “we’re all going to have some fun.”

Didn’t she hear about the sweatshirt? Will she cancel the trip when she does hear? Of course you’re nervous. So much can go wrong between this moment and getting through the gates at King’s Dominion.

But God knows everything. Why would he not punish Jacob? God must know what happened, and God is pretty powerful. Of course Jacob is nervous, because this all makes no sense. This is the world turned upside down.

And it’s more than the simple lack of punishment that is topsy-turvy. It’s even more basic: God has come down to chat with Jacob in this dream. In the ancient stories, God doesn’t do that very often, and the people he talks to are good people, not sneaky tricksters like Jacob. Why would God communicate with this bad guy, and actually make promises that continue the covenant made to Jacob’s grandfather?

That ladder, that ramp or ziggurat, may be a key to this.

We are used to hearing the old spiritual “Jacob’s Ladder,” which says “we are climbing Jacob’s ladder, we are climbing Jacobs’ ladder, we are climbing Jacob’s ladder, soldiers of the cross.” Who’s doing the climbing? We are. In the spiritual, our spiritual development is predicated upon doing the hard work of climbing so that we may go up to God. It’s certainly a theme that resonated with enslaved African-Americans who first sang it.

But it’s not really what is happening in Jacob’s story. Jacob doesn’t seem to be climbing. Messengers from God are going back and forth, doing all the hiking up and down. And then God comes down to Jacob, that greedy, jealous, trick-playing Jacob, the least deserving of God’s favor. God does the work...

...maybe because Jacob is too much of a mess to do the climbing himself. Maybe God knows that Jacob is utterly unable to climb up, so God will climb down. The God who loves this broken young man. The God who promised his grandfather that he would make of him a great nation. The God who put up with his grandfather’s wrong moves, and his father’s wrong moves, but who always, always keeps the divine promise.

The God who will eventually rename this man, no longer Jacob but then renamed Israel, the name that all of God’s people will gather beneath. The God who climbs down, helping us in our weakness, in our wrong choices, in our exhaustion, so that we can do God’s work. The God who loves us enough to believe in us, even when we sometimes forget to believe in God.

Yes, we need to climb up as we are able. But even when are not, God is with us, offering accompaniment, protection and homecoming for each of us. God climbs down until we can climb up. And for that we should be eternally grateful.

Amen.