

In Your Dreams

Genesis 27:41-45, 28:10-19

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In my sermon last week, I told a story about some sharp words that a cousin spoke to me several years ago, so hurtful that I still remember them a decade later. I am confident that I have also said some pretty insensitive and hurtful things to my family. Recently I have sat with several people who are experiencing trouble in their families – not disease or financial trouble, but trouble with the relationships themselves. I suppose most of us can point to people in our families or even close friends who have hurt or betrayed us. Unfortunately most of us can also think of someone we have hurt or betrayed. I suspect that we each have relationships that have gone wrong for reasons that seem beyond blame or that we cannot put our finger on.

Jacob and his family were not without their share of brokenness and hurt. Last week's reading from Genesis revealed some parental favoritism: "Isaac loved Esau . . . but Rebekah loved Jacob" (25:28). Later, Jacob convinced his older brother to sell him his birthright for a bowl of stew. The hungry Esau agreed and even swore an oath to do just that (25:29-34). Finally, when his father Isaac is old and blind, Jacob schemes with his mother to claim the older brother's blessing. Isaac is fooled and pronounces the precious family blessing upon his younger son, Jacob. Needless to say, older brother Esau is outraged and hurt when he discovers that his brother has taken what he always assumed would be his – his very future.

Esau cried out to his father: "Not for nothing was he named Jacob, the Heel. Twice now he's [stepped on] me: first he took my birthright and now he's taken my blessing. . . . Haven't you kept back any blessing for me?" (27:36, *The Message*). Isaac's answer was "No," and Esau vowed to kill his younger brother.

It sounds so evil, but don't we all have similar stories?

Eric's grandmother Nancy and her younger brother Norm grew up in Minnesota and then Ohio. When Nancy finished high school in the mid 1940s, she desired to go on to college and study history and archaeology. Nancy's parents told her "no". They could only afford to bless one child with a college education, and that child would be their son, Norm. Nancy was hurt by the decision and jealous of her younger brother. Many years later, after Norm had become successful, Nancy asked her brother for a loan of \$300 to help her through some hard times. For reasons beyond my knowledge, Norm refused to make the loan to Nancy. "Twice now he's stepped on me: first he took my birthright and now he's taken my blessing." Nancy vowed never to speak to her brother again. Nancy's three children barely knew their uncle Norm. To the day that Norm died in 2004, the two never reconciled. Jacob's story is not so different from our stories.

When we encounter Jacob sleeping and dreaming in the field at Bethel, he is a fugitive on the run from his brother's anger. The story here changes course. Genesis tells its readers the story of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob but it is not necessarily *about* Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We cannot forget the power struggle between older brother and younger brother, but for the storyteller that struggle is secondary. Jacob's deception and flight toward Haran are simply the background and setting for a much bigger story: God's story. It is to manipulative, cheating, fugitive Jacob that God shows up. Jacob, powerless and devoid of any religious expectations, lays his head on a stone in Bethel when his sleep is interrupted by a surreal vision and the voice of God himself. "It is a wonder, mystery, and shock that *this* God should be present in such a decisive way to this exiled one. The miracle is the way *this sovereign God* binds himself to this treacherous fugitive."¹

The vision itself is spectacular, a ladder between heaven and earth with angels ascending and descending. To any who have had a religious experience or encounter with God outside of conventional religious trappings, the vision brings a sigh of relief. It is not in church or temple where God speaks, but in a nameless place. It is not to the dutiful and religious whom God speaks, but to the treacherous and fearful. The spiritual giants in my own life find in this text reason to celebrate: earth and heaven are connected; angels are constantly moving up and down between heaven and earth, making earthly places and things come to life with spiritual significance.

I actually wanted to preach a whole sermon on this aspect of the story before us – the connection between heaven and earth – but something about Jacob and his brother kept tugging at me. The Jacob whom we know so far is selfish and opportunistic. His world offered little for the younger son, so Jacob looked out for himself, doing what he had to do to ensure his own survival, success, and even blessing. Jacob's dream is not only a promise that God speaks and moves in surprising places. It is not only evidence that the material world is alive with the spiritual. God's appearance to Jacob shatters the assumptions that have underlined Jacob's very existence: that he traveled alone and had to fight for his own survival.

God speaks to Jacob and says: "Know that I am with you and I will keep you wherever you go; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

"You do not travel alone," God tells the fugitive. "I travel with you. Jacob is not the only one looking out for Jacob," God tells the schemer; "for I will do everything I have promised you and your father and your grandfather."

Whatever unknown or inhospitable land that you occupy, you do not travel alone. God goes with you. However fervently you have watched out for number one, however you have tried to exert power over your own destiny, God is still the one in control of this world and will still be faithful to God's promises.

And what are these promises that God makes to Jacob and to us? For Jacob the promise sounds a lot like the promise that God made to Jacob's grandfather Abraham: land to live in, numerous

¹ Walter Brueggemann. *Genesis: Interpretation Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) p 242, emphasis mine.

children, and blessing that will extend to all the families of the earth – even his brother’s family, even our families. We twenty-first century Christians inherit at least this small part of the promise, the promise of blessing. We inherit it through the forgiveness of sins made known in the death and resurrection of Christ. Paul writes about this as he describes being adopted into the family of God and called sons and daughters (Romans 8:14-17). We have inherited it in the relative health, prosperity, and freedom of our land. We shall inherit it fully at the last when God completes the redemption of the world, the reconciliation of all people, and the re-creation of a new heavens and a new earth.

In that field in Bethel, in that dreamy encounter with God, Jacob was changed. The loner, out for number one, was now bound to the God who traveled with him and who would keep his promises. Jacob erects an altar and declares that the Lord will be his God. He cannot yet return home, but he will trust in this God who appears to treacherous fugitives in the middle of nowhere.

Or at least he will try. Like the rest of us, Jacob is not easily changed or converted. Even as he declares his allegiance to the God of his ancestors, he covers his bases, just in case this God proves unfaithful. Jacob adds an “if.” *If* God will be with me and will keep me and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear – if – then the Lord shall be my God. I suppose Jacob will be Jacob. Heather will be Heather, and you will be you.

Jacob lived far from his father and brother for twenty years before he returned home to a warm embrace. Nancy and Norm never did achieve reconciliation, at least not in this life. But since their deaths, their children have reconciled, thanks to the internet! I do not know whether you identify more with Jacob or Esau; if you are more like Nancy or Norm. I suspect most of us are a mixed bag, like the field in Matthew’s parable where wheat and weed are so intertwined that it is difficult to sort out the bad without pulling up a little of the good too (Matthew 13:24-30). Our faith is alternately naïve and conditional. We are one moment opportunistic and the next reactionary. We are in one relationship sacrificial and in the next selfish.

The good news is that God does not wait for us to get all this sorted out before he interrupts our confused and conflicted lives. As God came to Jacob at Bethel, God comes to us without invitation and without permission. God promises to keep us and protect us, whether we think we need it or not. And God does in fact go with us and keep us, even when we can only offer conditional trust. May you encounter that God in your world this week. May God disrupt all of your assumptions and illusions, and may that God go with and keep you wherever you go. Finally, may you allow that Lord to be your God – or may you at least try. Sometimes that is the best we can do. Thanks be to God.