

THE POWER IN A DREAM: JACOB'S STORY

Genesis 28:10-22

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Let me introduce you, or re-introduce you, to Jacob. The Bible specializes in characters like Jacob. Deeply-flawed yet lovable.

There's a stereotype about the Bible and the people who inhabit it. Folks who don't ever read the Bible have an assumption about what it's like. They assume that it's full of wooden characters, goody-two-shoes types, boring people with boring lives. They assume it's full of thou-shalt-nots, warning about all of the fun things that we shouldn't be doing.

Once you decide to actually open the pages of this book, and begin reading, let me advise you — it's not easy going — it's not a book to be read like a novel, or like a self-help manual — our Adult Ed classes give you a good starting point, and I can also give you some suggestions...what you find there are some interesting stories and some fascinating characters. These plot lines are worthy of "Scandal" and your favorite shows on Netflix. These men and women lie and cheat like the juiciest protagonists in the movies. The plot lines stand up to any Hollywood screen play.

Take Jacob, for example. He is part of the most famous biblical family tree. His grandfather was Abraham, the patriarch of Israel. Abraham and his wife Sarah, in their very old age, became parents to Isaac. You may remember the story of the almost-sacrifice of Isaac. Isaac and his wife Rebecca had twin boys, Esau and Jacob. Jacob is the one called a trickster. He and mother conspired to steal the birthright and

blessing from Isaac. The birthright and blessing belonged to the oldest son, Esau; they conveyed both emotional and financial rewards.

After Esau realizes he has been tricked, Jacob hightails it out of town. Actually Isaac tells Jacob where to go, because Jacob needs to find a wife. Can you follow all of that? I'm telling you. It would make great late-night TV. Several biblical commentators have called this little family, Isaac, Rebecca, Esau and Jacob, the world's first dysfunctional family.

So Jacob is a man on the run, a selfish man, easily influenced by others. As he is making his way towards the region where his father wants him to find a wife, night comes. He lays down, he's all alone, there are no other people around. There's no one with a home or even a tent, no one with whom he can spend the night. He is utterly alone, with a stone for a pillow. But he's been walking all day. He's tired. He eventually falls asleep. And in his sleep, he dreams. Now a dream in the Bible is never just a dream. A dream is a clue that God is sending a message. Jacob is dreaming but the message is, "Jacob, wake up! I have plans for you." He dreams of a ladder or a staircase. Many of us learned the song in Sunday School, "We are climbing Jacob's ladder" but many scholars say that the word should best be translated as "staircase" and I too prefer the staircase imagery.

In Jacob's dream, angels are walking up and down the staircase. And then God appears, right next to Jacob, reminding him of who he is. "You are the son of Isaac, the grandson of Abraham. I made promises to your grandfather that he would be the father of a great nation, that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

'Look up, Jacob. Out here in the wilderness, look at all of those stars. The promise is now yours. And wherever you go, I will be with you.'

Jacob's story is the story of a person who has gone astray. His is the story of a person who let himself be swayed into doing wrong...he was influenced by his mom, but still he's the one who tricked his dad and brother. He carries with him the weight of that sin. It pulls him down as he walks. He walks away from the scene of the crime, but the shame is still there. Do you know a Jacob? Have you been a Jacob at some point in your life?

Jacob's story is the story of a dysfunctional family, a family with sibling rivalry at its root; the parents contribute to the problem as the father Isaac shows favor to Esau and the mother Rebecca clearly prefers Jacob. His is the story of imperfect parents. Are there any other kind? Do you know a family that functions at optimal health all the time? Or is this story the story of all of our families to one extent or another?

I don't think it's a coincidence that God appears to Jacob when Jacob is all alone. He's spent the day walking, probably mostly or completely by himself. If you really want to think, go for a walk by yourself. It's almost impossible not to think when you're walking. No headphones, just you and your thoughts. There's something about the rhythm of your body while walking that prompts deeper thinking. I imagine Jacob walking, away from home, towards the unknown. Ego begins to strip away. He slowly loses his bravado. He become less cocky. Can we even imagine that Jacob becomes a little bit humble? More vulnerable? Is his spirit more open?

This is when God can get through to us, when our defenses are down, when we realize that, left to our own devices, we'll make some horrible choices. When we recognize, at least at some level, our need for God.

When Jacob wakes up, he's a new man. "Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place." He marks the spot where he slept as holy ground, sacred ground. And he promises to live his life differently from that moment on. "God, I will give you one-tenth of whatever you give to me," he prays, "from now on." At that spot, God and Jacob speak covenants to one another. God promises to always be with Jacob and Jacob promises to remember his dependence and thankfulness through the practice of generosity.

Will it all be smooth sailing now for Jacob? Not hardly. If you were watching a preview of coming attractions in the ongoing mini-series of the life of Jacob, you'd see that he, the former trickster, is going to be tricked himself more than once. He lifts the veil on his new bride only to find her less-attractive sister. Later, after he works seven years and gets the right bride that time, his favorite son will be kidnapped and sold to the Pharaoh, another trick. There will be moments of redemption, too. A reconciliation with his brother and father, and later his sons. Jacob will climb that staircase of faith, then stumble down a few steps, then start climbing the stairs again. Some days it will seem like things are just getting better and better. His trust in God is unshakeable, and he's living well, doing all the right things. Up the steps he goes. "This staircase only goes up for me", he thinks, some of that old cockiness returning. And then one slip of the foot and he ends up at the bottom.

That's the life of faith for most of us. Like all relationships, our relationship with God has its ups and downs. If you think there's something wrong with that, remember that in Jacob's dream, even the angels were ascending and descending the staircase. It's my story. Is it yours? There are times when I feel the closeness of God, as real to me as the feel of my own skin. And there are other times I catch myself wandering around in a desert of my own making. I feel lost and alone, and slowly I let myself be pulled back towards home.

All of our stories have their own plots, their own cast of characters, and their own settings. The setting, the place, is an important aspect of Jacob's story. The place where Jacob encounters God in a dream becomes a sacred place for him. Sacred places are sometimes called "thin places", places where there is the thinnest of borders between heaven and earth. These are places of transition, of transformation. One author says that thin places are locations "where human beings hate to be but where the biblical God is always leading them. It is when you have left the tried and true, but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are finally out of the way. It is when you are between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. If you are not trained in how to hold anxiety, how to live with ambiguity, how to entrust and wait, you will run."

Jacob is on the run, in this thin space, and God reaches out to him. He wakes from his dream and declares, "Surely God is in this place."

Dreams can be wake-up calls for those of us who are unaccustomed to listening for God's voice. If we think we're not good enough to receive a message from God, remember that Jacob tricked his own brother and father. God doesn't visit Jacob

because he's perfect but because God loves him and wants to remind him that his life has purpose.

Your dream may come while you're awake, while you're walking, while you're feeding a baby or driving to work. It may come through tears, it may come through a conversation with a friend, it may come as you read or pray. When God's voice speaks to you, pay attention. Listen to the words of unconditional love and believe them. Look around you and realize that you're standing on sacred ground, but then, what ground isn't? If God promises to be with us everywhere, isn't all ground holy ground? The playground where children's stories begin? The hospital cafeteria, where bread is broken? The parking lot after church, where people linger as the conversations grow deeper?

When God speaks to us in our dreams, we wake up for good. We wake from restlessness, we wake from aimless wandering. We wake up as entirely new people, with direction and purpose, and we are never the same again.