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Our First Families of Faith Stories from the Book of Genesis VI. Bargaining and Blessing

Genesis 28:10-22 – from The Message translation 10 Jacob left Beersheba and went to Haran. 11 He came to a certain place and camped for the night since the sun had set. He took one of the stones there, set it under his head and lay down to sleep. 12 And he dreamed: A stairway was set on the ground and it reached all the way to the sky; angels of God were going up and going down on it. 13 Then God was right before him, saying, "I am God, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. I'm giving the ground on which you are sleeping to you and to your descendants. 14 Your descendants will be as the dust of the Earth; they'll stretch from west to east and from north to south. All the families of the Earth will bless themselves in you and your descendants. 15 Yes. I'll stay with you, I'll protect you wherever you go, and I'll bring you back to this very ground. I'll stick with you until I've done everything I promised you." 16 Jacob woke up from his sleep. He said, "God is in this place - truly. And I didn't even know it!" 17 He was terrified. He whispered in awe, "Incredible. Wonderful. Holy. This is God's House. This is the Gate of Heaven." 18 Jacob was up first thing in the morning. He took the stone he had used for his pillow and stood it up as a memorial pillar and poured oil over it. 19 He christened the place Bethel (God's House). The name of the town had been Luz until then. 20 Jacob vowed a vow: "If God stands by me and protects me on this journey on which I'm setting out, keeps me in food and clothing, 21 and brings me back in one piece to my father's house, this God will be my God. 22 This stone that I have set up as a memorial pillar will mark this as a place where God lives. And everything you give me, I'll return a tenth to you."

One of the great and abiding themes in the American artistic imagination is that of someone who is unjustly accused of something and has to flee, staying just one step ahead of those who are pursuing him. We cheer for that character in so many books and movies precisely because he's the underdog, and we tend to love an underdog. Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn was perhaps the first American novel to explore this theme. You'll remember that in that story, it's the slave Jim who is on the lam, fleeing from a society that would re-enslave him to a master who wants to sell him "down the river" to a new owner in one of the states of the deep south. We root for Jim to outwit his pursuers and we are pleased when Huck, battling the dictates of both his

conscience and the law finally decides that he won't turn Jim in, despite the reward offered, despite the fact that even his church has told him he'll go to hell for helping a fugitive slave. And we say bravo! Or, do you remember "The Fugitive"? In both the television series from the mid-60s and in the movie from 15 years ago, the harrowing adventures of Dr. Richard Kimbell, unjustly accused of his wife's murder, were chronicled as he narrowly escaped being captured by the relentlessly pursuing Lt. Gerard. And whether in the tv series or the movie, millions of Americans rooted for Dr. Kimball to escape. We cheer for him because he is a good man, who did nothing to bring his travail on himself, continues to run, continues to outwit his pursuer.¹

In our scripture today, the latest installment of our summer sermon series on our "first families of faith" from the Book of Genesis, Jacob is also a fugitive, running for his life. Why? Well, last week we saw how he offered his brother Esau the spectacularly poor trade of Esau's birthright – that is, his right to receive, as the first-born son, 2/3 of his father's estate – for a bowl of beans when Esau came in from hunting famished and not thinking particularly clearly. And it gets worse: when father Isaac is on his deathbed, Isaac asks Esau to prepare for him one more time one of those meals of wild game that he so loved – and then Isaac would give him his final paternal blessing. Now this sounds like a small thing, but it was not. In that day, the father's blessing at the time of death conferred on the son the right to be the head of the family. So even having squandered away his *inheritance*, Esau could still have been Isaac's successor as head of this fractious family. But Jacob tricks him once again, this time with the help of his mother Rebekkah. While Esau is out hunting the game to make his father's last meal, Rebekkah and Esau fix a meal from some game that was on hand, and then Rebekah tells him to dress up in Esau's old and dirty clothes so he smells right, and she

¹I am indebted to Barry J. Robinson for the idea for this opening.
www.spirit-net.ca/sermons/a-or16-keeping.php

puts an animal skin on his arms so he is as hairy as is Esau. For you see, by this point, father Isaac is blind. And, to make a long story short, Jacob deceives every one of his poor blind father's remaining senses and convinces him that he is in fact Esau, bringing him the meal he wanted. And then Isaac gives him that paternal blessing. So, first Esau was cheated out of his birthright and now is cheated out of his blessing. And while we might think that such a fraudulent blessing was not legitimate, that wasn't the way it worked then. The one who received the blessing was indeed blessed – irrevocably.

When Esau realized what had happened, the story (a few verses before today's scripture) says two things: first, oh-so-sadly: *"Father, do you only have one blessing? Bless me too!" And then Esau wept.*" But second, Esau gets angry and says simply and chillingly *"I am going to kill my brother."* When Rebekka hears this, she helps Jacob run away and sends him off to her uncle's house many, many miles away. And that is where our story for this morning finds him: on the way to his uncle's farm, on the lam, one step ahead of someone who would do him harm – but, unlike with the slave Jim or Dr. Kemble, we have zero sympathy for *this* fugitive, one who has displayed time and time again such loutish behavior, who has been such a cheat and a scoundrel.

Our scripture today begins with Jacob stopping at nightfall and setting up camp and then bedding down for the night; do you remember how it was described? *"He took one of the stones there, set it under his head and lay down to sleep."* He took a stone for a pillow. And, like it or not, that's where our lives – good and decent people as we try to be – begin to connect with Jacob's life. For every one of us has had a stone for a pillow sometimes, haven't we? Every one of us has gone to bed and sleep didn't come because something was so weighing on our hearts. We've all laid there on our stone pillows when life brings us loss or hurt or pain or suffering. And while there have been times when we have deserved those stone pillows because of something we did or

said, some stupidity or insensitivity on our part, there are lots of other times when we don't deserve them and we are reminded viscerally of the Psalmist's observation and lament that indeed the rain falls on the just and the unjust. Stone pillows come both to those who deserve to have their attempts to sleep wracked with anxiety, and those who don't. In fact, there is a sense in which today's sermon – in which we shall set yet again the amazing **grace** of God to someone who is not worthy – is really more for any of you who might sometimes wonder in the middle of the night whether God can still love you for what you've done, it is more for those of you whose stone pillows feel like they are of your own making. But if you are one whose life has seemed more like Esau's, too often the victim of other peoples' sins and machination, whose stone pillows were put there by someone else, and you wonder where is God's **justice** in all of this, then I want to say: stay tuned. We will be following this generation of this family for the next month and we shall indeed see how God not only loves Jacob but also seeks to bring justice to Esau.

Back to our story. So Jacob beds down on his stone pillow – and then he has a dream. Now, if you or I were writing this story, Jacob's dreams would not be pleasant ones. No, you or I would say that his dreams *deserve* to be like those that Charles Dickens imagined for old man Scrooge as he dreamed of the ghost of Christmas future. But we're not writing this story, and instead the scripture tells us that Jacob dreams of a ladder going up into the heavens. He dreams he sees angels ascending and descending all night long. And even God makes an appearance in the dream, and does not scold or chide or express his revulsion at Jacob's behavior. No, God says this to him, after repeating the same promise to Abraham that a great nation, innumerable descendants would come from him: *"I'll protect you wherever you go, and I'll bring you back to this very ground. I'll stick with you until I've done everything I promised you."* Isn't God amazing?

The final episode of “The Fugitive” aired 43 years ago. (Does that make you feel old?) 73% of all television viewers watched it,² and they got to see a happy ending. We like happy endings, don’t we? In that final episode, the real killer of Dr. Kemble’s wife – the mysterious “one-armed man” – is captured and Dr. Kemble is exonerated. The movie version of “The Fugitive” also ended happily, and justice prevailed. And if you or I were writing the story of how Jacob responded after this amazing dream, this amazing pronouncement of the grace of God, we would have written a different ending for this story, I think. We would have given Jacob a repentance moment. He would be shown as having recognized the evil of his ways, as truly regretful, as vowing to make amends and live a better life. Our ending would be more like the way that Dickens ended “A Christmas Carol,” with Scrooge getting the chance to make amends for what he has done and to become a much better person. That’s how you or I, I think, would have ended this story; that’s the happy ending that we might write. Shows you what we know.

For what Jacob actually does, in an amazing act of presumptuousness, is to bargain with God. He acts as if God is selling something on eBay and Jacob’s wants to negotiate the price. Did you hear how he responded to God? He says this: *“If God stands by me and protects me on this journey on which I’m setting out, keeps me in food and clothing, and brings me back in one piece to my father’s house, this God will be my God.... And everything you give me [God], I’ll return a tenth to you.”* God offers this amazing, unconditional statement of grace and love, this incredibly broad affirmation that God’s care and love and promise continues with Jacob, and what does Jacob do? Indeed, he treats it as if God is offering to negotiate with him. He tries to see if he has gotten the best deal he can from God. He immediately starts trying to think of the ways that God’s deal will be good for him, and the least he has to do to get

²[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Fugitive_\(TV_series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Fugitive_(TV_series))

the goodies. We could translate Jacob's response to God like this: "Well, I'll only accept your offer, God, if you protect me while I'm on the lam, if you give me enough to eat, and if you get me back one day to my father's house, the father I tricked and lied to when he was on his very deathbed. Do those things God, and I suppose I'll give you a 10% rate of return on your investment."

So, as I have asked before – and as I have urged you to ask every time you listen to anyone's sermons – where is the good news in this story? Where is the good news of the Gospel in this tawdry tale? Well, it's in two places. The first one we have seen before and we will yet see again: the stories from these characters' lives in the book of Genesis remind us that, in the end, their stories and our stories are finally in fact and first of all a stories about **God**. In the end, Genesis is a story about God, not about the faulty families it chronicles. For in contrast to the religions of the day, the God of Genesis is not a fickle God. God doesn't give up, God doesn't turn away to someone more likable, more faithful. And God uses these folks even despite their sometimes stupid decisions and bad behavior. I find that a comfort knowing, sometimes, just what stupid decisions and bad behavior I'm capable of! How about you?

Second, the good news here is for any of us who have ever been tempted to *bargain* with God. Pastor Mary Naegeli has a powerful reminder here. She notes³ that once Jacob

...started telling lies, [he] spent his life *managing* his sin rather than *confessing* it. [But] The only way to manage sin is to sin some more. After Jacob's first lie to his father, he had to keep telling more lies before he could get the blessing his father would offer. Then he had to run away from home.... and the hole just got

³This and the following quotations are from <http://www.fpccconcord.org/sermons/s081300.htm>
Emphases mine.

deeper and deeper and deeper.

And then she asks a very wise question: "*Now when we get in holes like that, what finally breaks the cycle?*"

Well, what **doesn't** break the cycle is attempting to bargain your way out of it. For Jacob's attempted bargain there with God will not change God, but it will sadly signify that Jacob's heart doesn't have the deep peace that would come if he would stop bargaining and simply start accepting. It can be the same with you and me, my friends. Again, the wise words of Pastor Naegeli:

Now if you are exhausting yourself trying to **prove** to God that he should give you a blessing, please stop and look at the story again. Because God has, in fact, given you freely... what you have been seeking your whole life. You don't have to struggle to be blessed.

You don't have to negotiate. You don't have to bargain. The blessing is already yours, and that blessing is that

...God loves you. Unconditionally. [God's] not holding out until you become perfect. God has loved you already with an everlasting love that has no conditions attached to it... [God]'s created you for a purpose. And God promises to take care of you throughout your life. [God] says, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." That's a promise. God is here. God is with you now. If you think [God's] hiding; if you think [God's] checked out; if you think [God] doesn't care - please listen - [God] loved this scoundrel and stayed with this liar and cheat. I guarantee you, [God's] still with you.

I guarantee it. God guarantees it. Thanks be to God. Amen.