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Road Trip! Great Journeys in the Bible III. 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."

We Americans do love our happy endings. Every summer, newspapers, magazines, and websites will tout the best summer beach books – stories that don't tax your brain too much and which are often described in their ads as "feel good" reads – as well as the best summer movies, almost always light-hearted fare with endings where all turns out well. We love it when the good guys win and the bad guys get what's coming to them. The "Sound of Music" would not have endured with such continuing popularity for half a century if the Von Trapp family had been captured by the Nazis at the end. That's also one of the lasting appeals of all the now-predictable John Grisham novels where a young and innocent character has to confront some sort of evil, go through all sorts of trials, sometimes flee the forces that are threatening him, but

in the end justice is served, the bad guys lose and the young and no-longer-quite-so-innocent character prevails. And while John Grisham's novels may have become stale in their predictability, they do represent one of the abiding themes in American literature and cinema – that of someone who is unjustly accused of something, or unfairly threatened 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 do tend to love an underdog.

In our scripture today, the latest installment of our summer sermon series using the motif of "the road trip" to look at some of the great journeys in the Bible, we skip ahead two generations from last week's story about Abraham and look at the "road trip" that his grandson Jacob made. And Jacob is running for his life. But, unlike all those Grisham characters, we're not very sympathetic to Jacob. Why? Well, to make a long story short, he had manipulated and tricked his brother Esau into a spectacularly poor trade of Esau's birthright – that is, the 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 Jacob's nastiness got even 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. To make a long story short, just as Jacob had manipulated his brother, he now also tricks his father into giving him that paternal blessing. So, first Esau was cheated out of his birthright and now is cheated out of his blessing and role as head of the family. And while we might think that such a fraudulent

blessing shouldn't be 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 his mother 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 that forced road trip to his uncle's farm, on the lam, one step ahead of someone who would do him harm – but, unlike those Grisham characters, we have zero sympathy for *this* lout, this 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** life's journeys begin to connect with Jacob's. 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 may deserve to have their attempts to sleep wracked with anxiety, and those who don't.

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 nightmares. 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 express revulsion at Jacob's behavior. No, God says this to 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."*

I have to confess that if I were writing the story of how Jacob responded after this amazing dream, this amazing pronouncement of the grace of God to one so undeserving of it, I might have written a different ending for this story. I might have given Jacob a repentance moment. I would have him regretfully recognize the evil of his ways, and vow to make amends to his father and brother and to live a better life. That's how you or I, I think, might have ended this story; that's the happy ending that we might write. But that isn't how it goes, is it? For what Jacob actually does, in an amazing act of presumptuousness, is instead 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, and Jacob 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 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, where is the good news, the gospel, in this tawdry tale? Well, it's in two places. The first is simply that with these flawed and imperfect characters in the book of Genesis – and in fact, throughout the Bible – 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 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 notes¹ 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 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 our way out of it. For Jacob's attempted bargain there with God will not change God, but it does sadly signify that Jacob's heart doesn't have the deep peace that would come if he would stop

¹ This and the following quotations are from <http://www.fpccconcord.org/sermons/s081300.htm>
Emphases mine.

bargaining and simply start accepting. It can be the same with you and me, my friends.

Again, the wise words of Pastor Naegeli:

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

...God loves you. Unconditionally. [God is] not holding out until you become perfect. God has loved you already with an everlasting love that has no conditions attached to it... [God] has 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.