



Summer Worship Series: "Beginnings"
We Are Climbing

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
20 July 2014—Sermon Text: Genesis 28:10-19a
FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

"To me dreams are part of nature,
which harbors no intention to deceive
but expresses something as best it can" (Carl Jung).
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One of our ministerial colleagues, Rev. Jeanne Davis, is hosting a book signing this week for her book *Brother Jeanne*. Rev. Davis is not only the daughter of a bishop and spouse of an Elder. She is also a retired Elder from the North Texas AC. Stories fill her book. These yarns reflect wisdom and will elicit laughter, tears, and inspiration as she shares her life. Her book is available to buy between services next to the choir room.

Hear the day's lesson:

10 Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. 12 And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

13 And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; 14 and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. 15 Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

16 Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" 17 And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." 18 So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. 19a He called that place Bethel (Genesis 28:10-19a).

Isaac has sent his son Jacob at this point in our Genesis story to find a wife for himself in “Haran.” These nice Jewish boys according to the family tradition need to marry one of their own. Unlike his father Isaac, who gets a bride brought to him by a servant (perhaps Eliezer), the family sends Jacob on a journey for a bride.

To be honest however, Jacob is not only seeking a bride, but perhaps more to the point—Jacob is seriously running for his life. Jacob has stolen both birthright and blessing from his family in particular, and his dupe/chump/fool of a brother Esau—the first theft a result of his bargain with Esau, birthright for stew; and a second theft the result of disguise and bold-faced lies in the presence of his dying father.

Jacob performs more than the role of a swindler here; he is a contemptible and a sordid counterfeiter of the truth! His mother is a co-conspirator in that she concocts a story about her favorite son who must find a wife back in Haran to avoid fouling the family’s gene pool further with the local women—mostly Canaanites. Jacob’s outwardly dim-witted brother Esau has married a couple of these Canaanite lovelies as the story relates: “When Esau was forty years old, he married Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite; and **they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah**” (Genesis 26:34-35).

Of course, the truth is that Jacob’s brother Esau intended to kill him as soon as their father Isaac dies. Rebekah fashions the pretense about acceptable wives to protect Jacob and allow him to escape from his older and infuriated brother Esau.

On the way to Haran, Jacob sleeps the night at Bethel (house of God) and

dreams. The place suggests a holy site. The scene speaks of a ladder, but the Hebrew word translated “ladder” may mean something more like a “ziggurat” which is kind of a stairway. For example, the Tower of Babel was probably a variety of ziggurat. People then and now presume that “up” is where God lives. That the angels were “ascending and descending” imply Jacob’s interaction with God. God speaks, identifying himself as God of Abraham and Isaac. This is Yahweh—not just some local deity. God’s promise is in play here for Jacob and God speaks directly to him.

Upon awaking the following morning, Jacob sensed the presence of the holy and thus sets up his stone pillow to mark the presence of God—he even consecrates it with holy oil. He feels the awesomeness of the place and calls now what used to be Luz—Bethel: the “house of God.”

When I was a kid we were always taught that the people we read about in the Bible were the very best kinds of people. We never questioned that presumption, Thus, Samson was the very best kind of larger than life character. Yet we might wonder if Charles French might have been onto something, syntax aside, when he writes:

If ever there was a biblical anti-hero, it was him [Samson]. Other than being very good at killing bad guys, the Bible doesn’t have many positive things to say about this guy. Every story revolves around his arrogance and entitled attitude. If you want to see how completely lacking in empathy he was, look at the account of his wedding.

Samson supposedly falls in love with a woman who happened to be a Philistine, the sworn enemies of Israel. Now, this could have been an opportunity to broker peace, bring them over to the good guys. Instead, Samson treats her poorly and humiliates her and her family. Events escalate, she and her family are killed, and Samson goes on a huge killing spree. He never regrets his actions; just what those mean people did to him (French’s Blog, 1 August 2012; Anti-heroes of the Bible).

My guess we could traverse the whole Bible and find many anti-heroes—like Rahab—the good hearted prostitute, for example. Or Israel’s first king Saul, who near the end of his life decided to seek out the medium at Endor (1 Samuel 28:7). What I am saying is that the Bible presents people to us flawed and all. Thus one thing we could say about all the biblical characters we know, Jacob would be near the last ones to serve as a role model for human behavior. How does he stack up as a spiritual guide? He deceives. He lies. We need to take him with a grain of salt.

In this text there is no reference to Jacob’s lying or trickery or thievery of his elder brother’s birthright or his father’s promise of blessing. In a nutshell, we really see nothing changed in Jacob, despite what the hymn “Jacob’s Ladder” suggests. Later Jacob will change and will have a limp to prove it. But on his way to his uncle’s house we are “whistling in the dark” if we think Jacob has been converted to a life of moral rectitude. He is a case that will take God awhile to fix! In fact listen to the next few verses after our lesson today ends.

20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, 21 so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, 22 and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you” (Genesis 28:20-22).

Note the conditional “if” at the so-called vow Jacob makes. Jacob may change before Genesis ends, but we see little evidence of it here or yet! Perhaps the flawed nature of many biblical heroes reminds us that Israel paints portraits of real people—not just flat characters with no real vitality. Authentic people—genuine people are flawed, sinful, broken, co-dependent, self-destructive, chemically addicted, and in need of help from a real God who cares for them despite their flaws. Repeatedly, we can perhaps praise Jacob—

just not for his ethical behavior or moral rectitude. His character at this point of the Genesis story is plainly lacking. Yet somehow because of his faith in God he continues to trust God's promise (Paraphrasing blog: *Bad Faith in Genesis*: 14 November 2012,

Tim Stout). And maybe one day Jacob will sing along with Jerry Jeff:

I wanna go home with the armadillo

Good country music from Amarillo and Abi Lene

The friendliest people and the prettiest women you've ever seen

-- Gary P. Nunn (singer: Jerry Jeff Walker), London Homesick Blues Lyrics

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