

“Between a Rock and a Heavenly Place”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
September 30, 2007
Scripture: Genesis 28:10-22

We have an uncanny number of twins in our congregation. Christine and Loice. Matt and Ben. Ella and John. Jane and Joan. Linda and John. If the Deacons needed to provide a reason why they want us to wear nametags in October, these ten twins make for a good reason! And from what I know, our twins play much nicer than some of the twins in the Bible.

Our Bible story today is about a twin with a problem. Ever since their birth, there had been discord and suspicion between Jacob and his twin brother Esau. Maybe things would have turned out differently if they were born now. But they were born a long time ago, in a different place and in a different culture. They lived in a patriarchal culture based on primogeniture. The eldest son inherited the leadership of the family and a double share of the inheritance. Even in the case of twins, born minutes apart, birth order mattered. And Esau was born first.

Several chapters in Genesis are dedicated to this sibling rivalry. Like so many births in the Bible, Jacob and Esau were born to unlikely parents. Isaac and Rebekah were old and barren, unable to have children. As the Bible puts it, “the Lord granted Isaac’s prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived” (Gen 25:21). And while Rebekah was pregnant, back in the days before ultrasound tests could give any confirmation, the Bible says that two children appeared to struggle in her womb. She prayed about it and she received an answer from God. Now pregnancy is hard enough! But the normal challenges of pregnancy were compounded when Rebekah heard what God said to her in prayer. Two nations were in her womb and, God said, “the two peoples born of you shall be divided and the elder shall serve the younger” (Gen 25:22-23).

When it came time for them to be born, Esau was born first, and Jacob came out with his hand gripping Esau’s heel (Gen 25:24-26). In fact, there is a play on the Hebrew words, and the name Jacob means “heel-grabber.”

One day, many years later, Jacob was cooking while Esau was out in the fields. Esau came in and was famished. Esau asked for food; Jacob said first sell me your birthright. So hungry was Esau that he did, and the prophecy given during the pregnancy was under way – that the elder shall serve the younger. Later, as their father Isaac lay dying, Jacob and Rebekah connived to have Jacob pretend to be Esau and receive Isaac’s blessing intended for the firstborn. And with Isaac’s poor eyesight and weak strength, the disguise worked. The spoken blessing was like an arrow shot toward its goal. It released a power which could not be retracted. Isaac blessed Jacob with these words, “let

peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you" (Gen 27:29).

Esau came into the room minutes behind. And Esau was, as you can imagine, furious when he found out that Jacob had stolen his blessing. And Esau plotted to kill Jacob. And now Jacob was on the run.

Jacob was a fugitive on the run. Unprotected, outside all the protections of society. And now he is in a nowhere place in no-mans land. He has been running all day, trying to escape to a place far from a danger of his own making. And he is exhausted. He places a rock under his head and goes to sleep. Why the rock for a pillow? Maybe he had a bad cold and needed to keep his head higher than the rest of his body. But if I had to guess, he knew that he was a wanted man and he knew that as tired as he was, he could not let himself get too comfortable and be caught. So he put the rock under his head. He went to bed between a rock and a hard place. And then he drifted off to sleep.

And in the middle of what must have been a fitful night, Jacob had a dream. It was an amazing dream, so vivid and unexpected. 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 (Gen 28:12). And then God speaks to him in this dream.

The wakeful world of Jacob was a world of fear, terror, loneliness (and, we may imagine, unresolved guilt). We might have expected a dream filled with shame or fear, but instead he dreams of an alternative future with God. God speaks to him in a dream when he least expects it. And God speaks not words of harsh judgment, but hopeful words of promise and fidelity.¹

In his dream, 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; 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. (Gen 28:13-14)

That is a familiar promise, and echoes the promise God made to Abraham and repeated to Isaac.² Though there is strife in his family and Jacob has supplanted his older brother, God's promises of land and offspring and honor are now promised to Jacob. But then God makes a new promise, unique to the circumstances in which Jacob finds himself.

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" (Gen 28:15).³

He went to bed between a rock and a hard place. And in his dream, he realized that he was instead between a rock and a heavenly place. Fear is replaced with hope.

Shame with pride. He went to bed a fugitive and woke up found. Despite his trickery. Despite being a heel-grabber. He woke up, not captured by Esau's men who were pursuing him, but found by a loving God, who said to him, "know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go."

The connections between this world and the next are thin sometimes. So thin that God's voice seems clear and our path certain. Maybe you have had a dream like Jacob's dream. Maybe you have had a dream in which heaven and earth seemed closely connected and your life had a new purpose. Maybe you have had a dream in which messengers of God are whispering in your ear. Maybe you have had a dream like Jacob's dream, so real that you know you can trust it. And when you wake up from a dream like that, everything is different. Jacob woke up and knew what to do. He woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" 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." (Gen 28:16-17)

And he made a vow that would lead to generosity and reconciliation in his family. "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, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, 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." (Gen 28:20-22)

The Bible is filled with rather shady characters. When the Nominating Committee met last week, we looked at the story of Moses – Moses, a murderer, who was called by God to lead the Israelites out of slavery.⁴ The apostle Paul, whose writings fill the New Testament with words encouraging the early church, the apostle Paul was once, according to tradition, Saul, who "breathed threats and murder against the disciples" of Jesus (Acts 9:1) and approved the killing of the martyr Stephen (8:1). Saul became Paul and the church would not be here without him. And now here is Jacob – the deceitful, ambitious twin who with his mother acting as an accomplice, steals a blessing from his father and winds up being blessed by God.

The moral of the story is not that we are to attempt to be like the characters in the story. The moral of the story is not that the ends justify the means, nor is it that God will look the other way on our attempts to cheat and steal and lie and hurt. It's not about standards of conduct, or ethical principles or conscience. The moral of the story is not to encourage people to act like former Enron CEO Kenneth Lay who cheated stockholders and employees and the public trust but gave away millions of his dishonest wealth in support of his church and found honor. Jacob cheated his brother out of his inheritance and then promised to give a tenth of his possessions away, but that's not what this about. The moral of this story is not that God can take a sinner and make him or her into a brand-new perfect person. Even after experiencing this dream and hearing God's voice, even after believing God's words, Jacob is still Jacob. He is still driving bargains. Even as Jacob makes these promises, he adds an "if."⁵ The moral of the story, you ask? I'm

not even sure that there is a moral to the story. Because it's not really about Jacob, but about God.

A God who shows up unannounced. A God who will not be controlled. A God who offers blessing and promise to unlikely, undeserving characters like Jacob. A God who cares more about future hopes than past achievements.⁶

The story is about a God who will not give up on us. God who makes lavish promises and looks on our faults with love. A God who can set down a ladder from heavenly places to whatever desolate rock we are on, sending messengers climbing, helping us find forgiveness, purpose and freedom.

One thing is certain, Jacob does not deserve the dream he has.⁷ Jacob does not deserve God's love or protection or blessing. But God gives it, freely, without conditions. Grace is like that – available to even the most unlikely of us humans. Even to those of us who are on the run, to those trying to grab the heel of those who are older or stronger or wiser than us, God's loving grace comes, unexpected, undeserved, and overflowing with mercy. And God's grace comes even to us. Not because we deserve it, but because God loves us. No matter how far we try to run, how carefully we hide, God will find us. "In life and in death, we belong to God," begins the Brief Statement of Faith." "Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit." Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, Genesis in the Interpretation Commentary series (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) 243.

² See Genesis 12:1, 7; 13:15; 26:3-4.

³ Brueggemann, 244.

⁴ See Exodus 2:11-15.

⁵ Brueggemann, 248.

⁶ This last sentence is drawn from the work of process theologian Jay B. McDaniel, Of God and Pelicans: A Theology of Reverence for Life (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1989) 125.

⁷ Barbara Brown Taylor, Gospel Medicine (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995) 101.