

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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Jacob's Dream

Laura Bentley

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Introduction

The narrative lectionary drops us into the sweeping arc of stories about the family of God. And, goodness, it is a mess. Parents playing favorites. Siblings at odds. Deception and trickery. Love and longing and loss.

These are not perfect saints with shiny halos—they are real, complicated people. Despite this, or because of this, it's through their stories that God chooses to show up, to act, to bring heaven and earth closer together.

Today we find Jacob, the grandson of Abraham and Sarah, on the run from his own brother. Alone in the wilderness, with nothing but a rock for a pillow, he lies down. It's not a promising setup for an encounter with God. And yet, in the mess of family dysfunction, questionable morality, and a place far off the beaten path, God is there.

Before we join Jacob on the road, will you please pray with me?

Prayer for Illumination

God of Abraham and Sarah,
of Isaac, Rebekah, and Jacob,

God of every wanderer who has ever longed for a place to rest—

Open our hearts and imaginations as we hear your word.

Where our lives feel messy, show us your presence.

Where we feel unworthy, speak your blessing.

Where we have drawn lines about who is in and who is out, surprise us with your scandalous grace.

Meet us here, so we might say with Jacob:

“Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it.”

Amen.

Scripture

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ 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 stairway 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.”

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The Trickster

There are some things you need to know about Jacob.

You can imagine this man, coming upon a non-descript place on the wilderness path in-between places. No tent to pitch. No bag to unpack. Grabbing a stone for a pillow and closing his eyes.

Then a record screech. “Yep, that’s me. You might be wondering how I ended up here.”

Jacob is the son of Isaac, who was the heir to the blessing of God for Abraham and Sarah's family.

Isaac married a woman from his father's people, Rebekah. She became pregnant with twins. Rebekah received a prophecy about them: There were two nations in her womb who would be divided. And the elder would serve the younger.

Esau and Jacob were born. Esau just moments before with Jacob literally on his heel.

The boys grew up. Esau was a hunter, favored by his father; Jacob a shepherd, favored by his mother.

When Isaac was old, his eyes failing him, he prepared to bless Esau. He sent Esau off to hunt, to make him his favorite stew, a special meal for the occasion.

Now, Rebekah was outside of the tent and overheard Isaac's instructions. So, she called Jacob to her, telling him to make a stew for Isaac, then to put on Esau's clothes and cover his smooth skin with the hair of goats to mimic his brother's hairiness.

Jacob did these things, then went to Isaac, claiming to be Esau and claiming for himself the blessing of the firstborn son.

And so, we find Jacob in today's reading, on the run from an enraged Esau.

Jacob does not come off very sympathetically in this story. He deceives; he lies directly to his aging and blind father; he steals what rightfully belongs to his brother.

But why should his father decide who receives the blessing? A blessing that came first from God?

Why should the elder brother—in this case almost comically so, arriving into the world seconds before the younger—inheritor inherit a double portion and the promises made to Abraham?

Why should Isaac's favoritism prevail, and Rebekah remain outside "the room where it happens," her voice left unheard?

These were simply the cultural norms of this time and place.

But wherever there are norms, there are transgressors. Across cultures, in folklore and oral traditions, there are characters that do not respect the rules, who push up against the boundaries of morality, who are smart and sneaky, and take life a little less seriously. These tricksters and their stories teach survival in an unfair world. They are tales, maybe not prescriptive of what one should do, but descriptive of how to play the game when the deck is stacked against you. Take Robin Hood, as an example. He and his merry men robbed from the rich to give to the poor. They stole, deceived, and sometimes fought. But the outlaws were mocking an unjust system that hurt the least and lifted the already powerful.

The trickster reveals the moral ambiguity in what is deemed lawful and good.

And man, it is fun to be on the side of the trickster. That little Ferris Bueller smirk as they get away with another scheme. Now, Jacob was not robbing from the rich to give to poor. But he was making a way for when his time, place, and position gave him no way.

And God loves an underdog.

God Loves an Underdog

God has the discomfoting tendency to flip our expectations upside down.

Moses was an outsider and a murderer.

David was the smallest, the youngest, the least impressive of his family.

Ruth was a foreigner, a widow, a woman fleeing famine.
Mary was a poor teenager from the nowhere town of Nazareth.

Jesus was born in a stable, a refugee toddler, a homeless man. The disciples were a motley mix of zealots, dissidents, swindlers, and smelly fishermen.

Perhaps God saw something in Jacob and in the many others who were called in spite of their circumstances and sometimes in spite of their character. Perhaps God saw a tenacity or hunger or resilience that could be aimed toward the building of God's Kingdom.

Or perhaps God's grace is just scandalous. Undeserved, uncontrollable, inexplicable to us.

Maybe that is not bad news.

Because if we're honest, our ways of determining who ought to be extended grace are unfair, too. Our ways of determining who is blessed or who ought to be blessed, miss the mark all the time.

The unfairness of God's grace is truly the good news that weaves through the long, messy story of God's people. That God would uphold a covenant broken again and again by God's people, that God would send prophets to call them back to the right path just to see those prophets reject, beaten, even killed, that God would—while we were still sinners—send Christ to show us perfect love even to death, that Christ would forgive from the cross those who placed him there, that in the arguing and stumbling and messiness of Christian community the Spirit would come in power.

Thank God grace is unfair.

Dreams and Blessings

Jacob was not seeking God; he was simply running from the mess he was born into and the mess he helped create. And there God is.

God reveals Godself to Jacob in the vulnerability of a dream state.

Jacob only notices God's presence once his guard is completely down.

He dreams of stairs going up into the heavens with angels ascending and descending. He interprets it once he wakes—it's the gateway of heaven. Surely God is in this place, I didn't know it.

This particular place, the longitude and latitude, is not some secret gateway to heaven from earth. The geography is not the important thing here. It is in this place in him of fragility, of vulnerability, of a mess that he doesn't know how to fix, of

having no good options, that God meets Jacob with grace, with blessing, with a calling.

This story is about Jacob, but—to steal a line from Rob Bell—the power of Scripture is not just that it happened; it's that it happens.

God meets us in our fragility and vulnerability, in the messes we don't know how to fix, when there are no good options. God meets us with grace, with blessing, with a calling.

But if we don't let our guard down, we can miss it entirely.

Jesus told a story like this, of two lost sons. Two sons, an elder and younger, make very different choices of how they will live alongside their father. The younger rejects the expectations and norms placed on him and demands his inheritance before his father's death. He leaves his family and, you know how it goes, he takes the path of "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Except he runs out of funding and is still alive. Eventually, he flees the mess he made to go back to his father's household. He returns out of desperation.

The elder son stays. Does as he is supposed to do. He rejects nothing of tradition and expects to be rewarded in the future for it.

Jesus ends the story with a divide frame: The young son has been fully embraced, welcomed back to the family as if he has risen from the dead. And the elder son stands outside fuming—he has done everything right, where is his party? Where are his rewards?

The father meets the elder son outside the house, in the twilight, and tells him, “You are always with me. Everything I have is yours.”

Where God Meets Us

All is grace.

God stands beside us in the messes we make, in the messes that are made around us, in our disgust with the messes of others. The arc of God’s story is one of God moving toward us, drawing near to us, until God became one of us, until now, when God’s own Spirit dwells in and among us.

If we let down our guard—drop our schemes and our judgments—we may catch sight of heaven and earth meeting in even in this place, in this mess, with these people, and even those people today.

Mess may feel like too light of a word for where we find ourselves today. We are a people easily outraged, quick to anger, even quicker to play judge, jury, and executioner. We are too often either convinced of our own righteousness or steeped in our shame. Blind to the grace that has been with us all along.

I say we because I include myself. I struggled with the story of Jacob because there are certain people that I don’t want to say grace is for. I want to add an asterisk.

Maybe this story holds up a mirror for you, too.

God’s grace is a scandal. God’s blessing is unfair. And that is good news.

For the elder and the younger siblings among us; for the favorite of one parent or the other; for the ones left out all together; for those comfortable with the way things have been and terrified of the changes that may come; for those who have felt the deck stacked against them from the start; for the those desperate to come home and those who resent that they stayed; God is with you. God meets you in the messiness of your real life.

All is grace.

And with grace comes a call.

I'm grateful to our Wednesday Bible study for this wisdom: With a blessing comes a charge. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob received God's blessing on them and on their descendants, by birth and by faith. And that blessing was to be turned outward.

We are blessed to be a blessing. We are given grace that overflows that we might pour it into another's cup. In the moment we recognize the grace that has been given to us and turn it outward to others—that is the gate of heaven on earth, where God's Kingdom comes.

May it be so with us.

Amen.

Benediction

The benediction includes both a blessing and a charge. Yesterday, I sat in my living room, and it was a mess. The house needed to be cleaned, I couldn't get our kids to listen,

the dogs were barking, my husband wasn't feeling well, this sermon needed to be trimmed down to a reasonable length, the list of tiny grievances can go on. And I saw across the room a little kitschy "Thankful" that we have on our mantle. I looked at it and thought, "I'm not."

It wasn't until 10pm when I finally had a chance to edit this message, that I realized I missed it. God's grace was there in the mess of my living room.

I know many of you have much more difficult messes to navigate in your lives. I know our nation and our communities have much more difficult messes to navigate.

But God is present in the big messes, too.

My charge to you: Don't miss it. Don't miss the grace that has always been yours. Don't miss the opportunities for heaven to meet earth when you extend that grace outward.

And remember this all stems from a blessing:

May you trust that the love of God the Father,
the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
go with you today and always. Amen.



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2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630
www.westminster-church.org