



“Between Brokenness and Blessing”

Rev. Dr. Michael L. Gregg

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Genesis 28:10-19a

My cousin, Steve, who is one year older than me, played the electric guitar growing up. My aunt and uncle weren't too happy with this choice of instrument, but I figure they should have been grateful that it wasn't the drums. My parents can tell you about that one. When my brother and I were kids we would listen to Steve, this budding musician, strum songs from Guns n Roses and Metallica as he dreamt of one day playing in a metal band. Steve played a lot of music, but his favorite song was Led Zeppelin's Stairway to Heaven. I think Stairway is a rite of passage for every young electric guitar player as they learn those slow, clear notes. The lyrics, even today, ring in my mind as we heard the scripture lesson speak slowly of the struggles of Jacob. The lyrics of the song tell of a woman who wants to buy it all... even a stairway to heaven. And oddly, we see a stairway to heaven appear to the trickster Jacob even after deceiving his father to get it all, every single blessing. When I read the biblical story for today and thought of Jacob, I had Led Zeppelin's haunting tune in my mind.

The lectionary texts this summer have been rather haunting too and also enlightening as we have examined flawed families in the Bible... dysfunctional parents, messed up kids, and a God who loves and redeems broken lives. Last week we saw the brokenness on full display with the struggle between Jacob and Esau. Esau hurriedly and rashly traded his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of soup. And then their mother, Rebekah, schemed with Jacob to trick Isaac into giving the first-born blessing to the wrong child. Esau was enraged and wanted to kill his twin. And... that is how the story ended last week. Fun stuff.

So, how did the totally rational, emotionally healthy, and extremely wise Jacob respond to his brother's death threats? Well, he ran. He didn't take anything with him. He just ran. He fled... scared, scarred, and scorned... and utterly alone. Rebekah was Jacob's accomplice by concocting a story to get Jacob out of the house. She continued her scheming ways by convincing Isaac that Jacob needed to go back to the ancestry land to find a wife. So, Rebekah ordered her favorite child to run away, into the dark night, knowing that he would be all alone with his guilt and depression and that she would probably never see him again. This family born from the Father of Faith became fractured, fallen, and frail. Blind Isaac was betrayed, conniving Rebekah was heartbroken, impatient Esau was angry, and lying Jacob was in a cutoff and alone. This was definitely a family caught between brokenness and blessing.

So, Jacob took his birthright and his blessing and got the heck out of town, leaving the remnants of a broken, beat up family. And, as we heard in the Scripture lesson today, even after all of the pain caused by his selfish acts, Jacob would soon receive the blessing of God, a blessing to complete the holy trinity of birthright, patriarchal blessing, and divine blessing. And it doesn't seem quite fair, does it?

But, before God blessed him, Jacob was broken. He found himself cut off from his parents, from his land, from his brother, and from God. Jacob found himself in the long loneliness of isolation and fear. He left Beersheba in the far southern region of Israel to go to his family's homeland in Haran near the upper reaches of the Euphrates River. This was a very long and arduous trip. This was a very long and arduous isolation. And in this loneliness, in the long and languid journey, in this in between time of brokenness and blessing, Jacob was transformed. He had a dream. Resting on his flight from Esau and his trek towards a future wife, Jacob spent the night on the cold, hard ground. He didn't have anything for a pillow except a cold, hard stone. In the midst of his cold, hard brokenness he began to dream. He dreamt of a "ladder set upon the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven." This wasn't like an aluminum ladder you might use to climb to the roof of your house, no matter what the hymn *We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder* says about climbing the rungs like a good soldier. In the ancient Middle East, the image of the connection between heaven and earth was less like a ladder and more like a ziggurat or ramp built as a symbolic religious structure connecting people with God. Do you remember pictures and ideas about the tower of Babel? Think about the winding ramp, circling to the sky. And then, on this ramp Jacob saw angels, or messengers, ascending and descending.

Then something remarkable happened... God appeared. God stood beside Jacob. God was so near to Jacob that God was close enough to reach out and touch. And then, God whispered a profound blessing: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring." Wow. Jacob already knew he had the patriarchal blessing of Isaac and Abraham, but now the God of the Universe reaffirmed this blessing that was received through pain and suffering, through treachery and broken relationships. And that's not all God says: "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." God blessed the broken Jacob. What we don't hear in this long speech is judgment. What we don't hear is condemnation. What we don't hear is shame. God comes to a scared, shattered, isolated liar and thief and blesses him! If this doesn't transform Jacob, nothing will.

So, when Jacob awoke, he was not only changed but the place where he was sleeping had changed. The place where he was resting was now holy ground. Jacob built an altar to remember this special moment. He took his stone pillow, poured oil on it and suddenly the place became Bethel, the House of God. God now resided there... lived there. Jacob's life had been transformed and the physical place had a new name.

Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, a Scottish contemporary Torah scholar and author, believes Jacob was transformed because he faced his past family history. She says, "this text reminds me of a tradition that the place where Jacob lay was the same place where Isaac was bound. Jacob deliberately aims for that place because he is haunted by it. He is a victim of his father's binding. That's the first place he goes to when he leaves his family and is on his own. That's where he has the dream and that's where God assures him, "I'll be with you"—in spite of the terror of his father's experience." She goes on to say, "In the Hebrew text, when Jacob gets up after the

dream, he is described as ‘lifting up his legs.’ It means that he gets himself together and goes. The midrashic commentary is that Jacob has become light-footed. He discovers a certain energy after lying all night in the place where his father, who was bound hand and foot, couldn’t use his legs.”

As we will see in coming weeks, Jacob will still be bound by his mistakes and his dysfunctional family. He didn’t live happily ever after. The trickster, Jacob, will get tricked himself by Laban, his uncle. He thinks he will marry the young and beautiful Rachel, daughter of Laban, in exchange for seven years of indentured servitude. But Laban will trick the trickster and deceive Jacob into marrying Leah, the older sister. Jacob will then have to serve Laban for yet another seven years in order to marry Rachel. Then, Jacob’s bad experiences will continue when he will wrestle with an angel of God on the Jabbok River and limp away with a permanent injury. We see in his older years that Jacob’s own sons will trick him by bringing him the bloody multi-colored coat of his favorite son, Joseph. The sons will lie to their father and tell him a wild beast killed him. The trickster will get tricked throughout his life and it will be the fault of the family system that he perpetuated from the moment he grabbed Esau’s heel at birth. The legacy of his flawed family will continue into his children and his children’s children.

But Jacob was blessed anyway. Jacob was blessed anyway. And how did Jacob find blessing in the midst of brokenness? How was Jacob able to find transformation in the midst of treachery? How was Jacob able to find solace in the midst of sadness? He needed space to dream. We all have crazy dreams. I’m sure a ladder in the desert in a no-name place in the midst of Jacob’s depression was an absurd dream too. But Jacob surrendered, opened himself up, and God came down and heaven’s gates were unfettered. Jacob hadn’t been able to see it until then.

Think about it, from birth Jacob was actively doing something to distract himself from God. The Scripture this morning is inundated with activity and action. He came out of the womb already grabbing, reaching, striving to be the first and the best. Jacob ran away, left Beersheba, stumbled upon this “certain place,” got a stone for a pillow, and laid down on the ground. This man on the run was even on the run in his dreams. He dreamt of angels busily moving up and down the ladder. Jacob couldn’t escape his overwhelming and all-consuming life, even in his dreams.

But God showed up in the midst of his running and drew near to him. Jacob uncovered the blessing of God by taking time to rest, to sleep, to dream. He had to stop running. We have to stop running. We have to stop running from our flawed families, from our broken relationships, from our hurt feelings. We have to stop running from our scorns, our scars, and our sins. We have to stop running from our lies, our lives, and ourselves. We have to stop building our stairways to heaven and actually take time to let God draw near to us in our loneliness and isolation. We have to stop long enough for God to whisper in our ears and pronounce divine blessings upon us.

When we stop running, take time to dream, and listen to the whispers of God we will find God right next to us blessing our brokenness and transforming our lives. Are we like the woman in the song Stairway to Heaven, wanting something she couldn’t have? Are we like Jacob busily climbing the ladder of deception and selfishness? Are we climbing the ladder of competition? Are we climbing the ladder of success? Are we climbing the ladder of resentment? Are we

climbing the ladder of isolation? Or will we take a moment to notice that God resides between the brokenness and the blessing?

The angelic stairway didn't give Jacob access to heaven and it doesn't give us access to heaven either. God instead came down and spoke to Jacob where he was. God isn't removed from our lives at the detached end of a heavenly staircase. God isn't removed from our flawed families while calling out to us from a distance. If we stop and take time to dream, we will find God's immanent presence whispering blessing into our souls. And that's when transformation occurs.

And thank God! Thank God, this story isn't about morality. Thank God, this story is really about unearned and unexpected grace. Thank God, God blesses flawed families. Thank God, God blesses tricksters. Thank God, God blesses thieves. Thank God, God blesses liars. Thank God that at Jacob's point of limbo, landless, and rootless existence, God met him and transformed him and will transform us as well. Thank God, God blesses us in, and despite of, our brokenness.

Thank God and Amen.