

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Sunday, July 23, 2023**  
**10am**

Text: Genesis 28:10-19a

Theme: Anything but Ordinary: Jacob's Dream at Bethel (Dream)

[prayer]

We left off last week with Jacob convincing his twin brother, Esau, to trade his birthright for a bowl of stew. The stage was set for high family drama, which unfolds in the chapters between last week and this week's Scripture lessons. Isaac is now quite elderly and almost blind. He summons Esau and tells him that soon he will confer the patriarchal blessing – the official sign act that will anoint Esau as the next head of the family. Isaac tells his son to go hunting and prepare his favorite food, after which he will bless Esau.

Rebekah, though, still harbors great ambition for her younger son, Jacob. She overhears Isaac's conversation with Esau and quickly devises a scheme to steal Isaac's blessing for Jacob: She will cook Isaac's favorite meal and Jacob will take the food to his blind father and trick Isaac into blessing him instead of Esau.

Jacob is skeptical of this plan, not because he morally objects to the trickery, but because there is a practical flaw in Rebekah's scheme: Isaac uses touch to differentiate between the twins, and Esau and Jacob feel very different. Esau is hairy; Jacob is not. Isaac will be able to tell that Jacob is not Esau.

But Rebekah is not deterred. She says, "Don't worry about it," and then she covers Jacob's arms and the back of his neck in goat hide so he will feel hairy. And she dresses Jacob in Esau's clothing so he will smell like his brother. And then she gives him the food she has prepared and sends him into Isaac's tent.

Amazingly the ruse works! Isaac senses something is off because 'Esau' sounds like Jacob. But ultimately the touch and smell convince him otherwise. He blesses Jacob in the guise of Esau, saying:

*“May God give you  
showers from the sky,  
olive oil from the earth,  
plenty of grain and new wine.  
29 May the nations serve you,  
may peoples bow down to you.  
Be the most powerful man among your brothers,  
and may your mother’s sons bow down to you.  
Those who curse you will be cursed,  
and those who bless you will be blessed.”* (Gen 27:28-29 CEB)

Now, Jacob and Rebekah apparently did not think about the aftereffects of their scheme, because when Esau comes home and he asks for the blessing he has dutifully prepared for, Isaac immediately realizes something is terribly wrong. *“Isaac was so shocked,”* the Scripture says, *“that he trembled violently. ‘Who was the hunter just here with game? I blessed him, and he will stay blessed!’ And when Esau heard what his father said, he let out a loud agonizing cry and wept bitterly. He said to his father, ‘Bless me! Me too, father!’ But Isaac said, ‘Your brother has already deceitfully taken your blessing.’”* (Gen 27:33-35 CEB)

Isaac gives Esau a blessing, but it is just not the same. The blessing that he conferred on Jacob has legal force; there is nothing to be done. Esau is rightfully furious, so filled with rage that he threatens to kill Jacob. The consequences of years of favoritism, manipulation, jealousy, and deceit have become deadly. Isaac and Rebekah are forced to send Jacob away to save his life. They hope that time and distance will cool Esau’s anger. It seems like Rebekah got what she always desired: Jacob will now inherit the position of patriarch. But her choices have ironically cost her both her sons: Jacob to exile, Esau to hatred.

This brings us to today’s Scripture lesson. Jacob, having fled his brother, is now wandering in the wilderness between Beersheba and Haran. The narrator does not detail Jacob’s psychological state, but we can use our imaginations here. Stubborn pride at having bested his brother has quickly been replaced by fear. And as his footsteps lead him further and further into the wilderness, the doubts and regret begin to creep, and the lonely reality of his situation finally sets in: His choices have made him a refugee from his own family. He can never go home again.

The consequence of sin is always estrangement. Sin alienates us from God, from each other, and importantly, from ourselves. When we sin, we become strangers, people we do not recognize. Jacob's loneliness is not just a practical consequence of his bad choices; it is a spiritual consequence, too. His physical exile is paralleled by a spiritual exile. Until this point, Jacob's relationship with the LORD has been defined in terms of his father and grandfather. The LORD is the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac. Reverence for Yahweh is a family affair.

But now Jacob has no family. Does he have no god, too?

As Jacob lays his head down on that rock, exhausted and fearful, I wonder if he knows that he can still call upon the LORD. I wonder if he knows that this is the moment to confess where he went wrong and ask for God's help. As outsiders who know how this story ends, it seems obvious to us that God is with Jacob. But Jacob does not know that. He thinks he left the LORD behind in Beersheba. And he is so disoriented by the consequences of his sin he has no idea how to reach for grace.

Scripture teaches that were it not for God's mercy, our sin would permanently separate us from God. But the good news of the Gospel is that despite our sin God has claimed us as His own. When we are baptized, we declare that *by grace God chose us first*. When we receive communion, we declare that *by grace God made a covenant with us first*. We call this prevenient grace – the grace that goes before us. God knows all about the flaws in our character, the bad choices we are prone to make, the sin that trips us up over and over and over again. And still God in His love and mercy and faithfulness says, "You are mine." This is what the ancient Israelites called *hesed* – God's lovingkindness.

In a moment of profound weakness and vulnerability, God claims Jacob as His own, too. God says, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which *you* lie I will give to *you* and to *your* offspring...and all the families of the earth shall be blessed *in you*" (vv. 13-14 NRSV). God extends to Jacob the promise God made first to Abraham and then to Isaac. God makes a covenant with this trickster, this cheat, this sinner without home or hearth. And not only does God extend the covenant, God also promises to redeem what Jacob's sin has ruined: "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” (v. 15). God promises to one day restore Jacob’s home and family to him. Jacob does not deserve any of us; this is the work of God’s *hesed* alone.

Scripture never defines prevenient grace; instead, it shows us. It shows us that prevenient grace has nothing to do with our actions; it is always God taking the first step. And God does this well before we even know we need His grace. It is God that goes before Jacob into the wilderness. It is God that speaks to Jacob in a moment of hopelessness and desperation. It is God who offers the gift of God’s presence. It is God who promises to restore what is lost. Jacob has no idea how to help himself; Jacob does not even know that God is with him! (v. 16) He wakes from his sleep and declares, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God and the gate of heaven” (v. 17). And he names the place Beth-el, which means ‘House of God.’

We associate the phrase ‘House of God’ with dedicated spaces of worship: temples, synagogues, cathedrals, church buildings. These are indeed sanctified spaces where the Spirit of God is present. But then there are the thin places throughout our lives where we also encounter God’s presence, the times and places where heaven touches earth and God speaks directly to us.

When I was leading discussion at campfire for the elementary campers at Twinlow the other week, one little girl asked, “How do I know when God is speaking to me?” I said, “That’s a good question. What do we all think?” And the other children began popcorning out their answers: *When I feel peaceful. When I feel brave. When I help another person. When I do something kind. When I feel loved.*

Children are so much wiser than adults. Jacob was surprised that he encountered God in that wilderness place, but children know that there are thin places everywhere. The location does not matter. A thin place appears at God’s initiative and God’s initiative alone. We do not seek them out; they find us.

This is the nature of grace. It finds us. And it has found us permanently in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is a thin place where heaven came down to earth. In Jacob’s dream, the connection between heaven and earth is visualized by (depending on the translation) stairs or a ladder. For the ancient Israelites it was the Tabernacle, and for first century Jews it was the Temple in Jerusalem. But for

those of us who believe that once upon a time God took on flesh and walked among us, Jesus is the connection between heaven and earth. In John 1 we read this beginning at verse 45:

*Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked. “Come and see,” said Philip.*

*When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” “How do you know me?” Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.”*

*Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.”*

*Jesus said, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.” He then added, “Very truly I tell you, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.” (vv. 45-50 NIV)*

Jesus identifies his own body with the ladder in Jacob’s dream. In Jesus God’s presence has been made manifest to us. Jesus is the embodiment of God’s prevenient grace – the grace that walks the way before us, the grace that convicts and calls us out of our sin, the grace that extends God’s covenant promises from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to you and to me and to the whole of humanity. In the thin places of our lives, the Holy Spirit testifies to this gift of grace and assures us that no matter where we go, no matter what we do, no matter how badly we screw up, God is with us.

In response to the grace that God offers him, Jacob takes the stone that was his pillow, and he stacks more stones upon it and builds a monument to God. And he consecrates the monument with oil. It becomes a public witness, a sign to all who pass by that God was in that place.

As we prepare to come to the Lord's Table today, let us mark this time of communion as another thin place, a place where the presence of God is made manifest to us in the breaking of this bread and the drinking of this cup. God's grace has led each one of us to this moment, and God's grace will one day lead us home.

Amen.

*[Introduce prayer song: Our prayer song is “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder.” This song is a Negro spiritual once sung by formerly enslaved people. While the Holy Spirit may give it unique and personal meaning for each one of us, as a predominantly white congregation we must also sing it with our hearts tuned toward humility and respect for the original intent of the song. This song is not primarily about the biblical story from which it draws its name. Instead, it is about the sacred relationship that we keep with our Savior, Jesus Christ, whose death and resurrection has opened the way to heaven. Heaven was the only realization of freedom for generations that suffered under the yoke of injustice and oppression. Jesus was the ladder to freedom.]*