

## ***Discovering God In Our Unraveling***

Genesis 28:10-19

Sunday, July 30, 2023

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*Jacob's encounter with God at Bethel changes and heals him, disrupting his life of emptiness and raising him to the knowledge that God is with him.*

I am always amused when I hear someone speak about a desire to return to Biblical family values. The culturally proficient side of me understands what they are saying, but the sarcastic side of me wants to say something like, "Do you mean family values like Cain murdering his brother? Or maybe you mean a biblical view of marriage, like Abraham who had three wives, or David who is reported to have six, and was driven to kill the husband of his mistress Bathsheba? There are stories of fathers trading their daughters and accounts of sexual assaults on women.

And then there is this special sort of splendid family dynamics in the story of Isaac's twin sons Esau and Jacob. Their sibling rivalry began before birth. "The children struggled together within (Rebekah)," Genesis 25 reminds us. Their life story is one of struggle and conflict, symbolized by their birth. After Esau was born, Jacob emerges from their mother's womb gripping his brother's heel – which is exactly what his name means in Hebrew. They are forever more placed in competition with each other. The prime values of Jacob's life are not what we would want for our children or grandchildren: his life is spent unraveled by threads of jealousy and the garments of lying and cheating. He is his mother's favorite child, but we cannot help to understand why. Jacob is no saint: he steals his brother's birthright. He stoops low by deceiving their blind father, forever breaking his brother's trust. Jacob cheats his brother out of his birthright for a bowl of stew, and then disguises himself to take advantage of their elderly and disabled father.

These are the sorts of values by the patriarchs of Genesis.

But there's something else: while scripture details the robust faith of Abraham, much less is said about Isaac, and almost nothing is mentioned about Esau and Jacob. God blesses Jacob with the promise of a rich future, but up until this moment at Bethel, Jacob seems to give God little, if any attention.

All of this is to say that either God makes incredibly bad choices in appointing heroes, or that God's promises extend beyond human sinfulness. It is a reminder that God shows up in the most unlikely, and perhaps unraveled places of our world and our lives. Eugene Peterson once wrote that "we do not live in an ironclad universe of cause and effect. In the presence of the God of Jacob, there is life beyond prediction. There is freedom to change, to become more than we were in the presence of the God who (as the Psalmist says) 'turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water.'"

We know the ways life can leave us unraveled. In Peter stepping outside of the boat, we see faith overwhelmed not by doubt, but by fear. In the story of Rizpah, a story many of us had never heard, we discovered the ways grief unravels but persistence heals. In Zacchaeus, we encountered the unraveling of one who was trying to remain hidden from God.

Jacob, however, is different. He is unraveled by the sorts of bad decisions and choices he has made throughout his life. Family dynamics, of course, are always difficult to navigate. But for Jacob it seems as though he has never made any attempt at maintaining a healthy relationship with his sibling. He has done everything possible to drive a wedge between them, and all of his efforts have succeeded. He's now on the run for his life. Esau is done. All he wants is a chance to kill his brother.

As I said, it's a lovely tale.

Sadly, it is also a common story of ruined relationships. Jacob outmaneuvers his brother for their father's blessing. He risks it all, but then is forced to leave the family home. He achieved his goal, but lost his family. Everything unravels, and we are left wondering where God might be in this story.

Among the stacks and stacks of books I sorted at my sister's house was a tiny volume published in 1946. It is titled, simply, "Hiroshima," by John Hersey. It was a ground-breaking account of survivors of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima at the end of World War II. This copy had apparently been my father's, which raised all sorts of questions for me as I knew he had been trained for a possible invasion of Japan to end the war. Clearly, the question of the atomic bomb was not some remote theory for my dad. It's a slim book that has never gone out of print since it was published after World War II.

Hersey tells the story through the lives of five ordinary citizens, including an American-trained Methodist minister named Kiyoshi Tanimoto. Having survived the blast, Tanimoto's faith guides him to acts of rescue and compassion. He sees an old lady crying, "I'm hurt! I'm hurt!" The confusion and grief of the moments cause him great pain and guilt. But years later, having survived that awful unraveling, Tanimoto will travel to the United States. He spoke out against nuclear weapons, raised money for survivors, and renewed his faith.

Tanimoto makes the awful, but blessed discovery of Jacob: "surely God was in this place—and I did not know it."

We live in a time when many of us, like Jacob, are on the run. We may not be running away from fractured families, but we may be running from inner compulsions to be the best, to work harder, to be smarter. We may be engulfed by waves of emotional distress, sent charging into a wilderness of fear. We are running from the places where we are unraveling.

For some, this running has become a signature feature of our lives. Unsure of where we might get answers, we go around the world searching for some holy place where we might discover God's love anew. In our post-covid era of travel, pilgrimages and "pray-cations" are becoming more and more popular. We're searching for some sort of spiritual moment, some awakening. These trips range from whaling expeditions to visiting ancient shrines, to even running up to Gower, Missouri to see the perfectly maintained body of a 96-year-old nun who died five years ago. When the workers at an abbey

outside of Kansas City, MO uncovered the grave of sister Wilhelmina Lancaster this spring, they were surprised to find that her un-embalmed body was in near-perfect condition. As news of the discovery grew, thousands of people flocked to see her body, believing it to be the sign of a miracle. I hope that I don't sound too jaded when I say it's astonishing that a four-year old corpse brings more people to church than a carefully thought-out sermon.

Lee Ann Marino writes about the stories she has heard about such trips. "Each went with the hopes that their pilgrimage would render a special blessing...it seemed," she says, "like everyone was looking for the sacred, looking to touch it...in their ordinary lives."

What is fascinating is that all of these pilgrimages, which have become a multi-million industry, are happening at the same time when the world is facing a great refugee crisis. It is fascinating to contrast the millions forced out of their homes like Jacob to the millions searching for glimpses of the sacred.

Jacob's encounter with God is surprising, even disruptive. But it is healing, and a reminder that God journeying with us lifts us from brokenness into hope. Sometimes, we just have to lay our heads down on a pillow and look up. Amen.

My point is many of us are searching for signs of the sacred. Yet Jacob's encounter was completely unplanned. It was a surprising encounter. In a dream, Jacob sees the spaces between heaven and earth disappear. Suddenly, God is present. There in a moment of unraveling, God shows up. This is the promise of the gospel, we will learn. Jesus does not abandon the disciples. God does not let go. We might try to run, or we might believe we are beyond God's intervention.

But God does not give up on Jacob, no matter how poor his choices. "Know that I am with you," God says, offering words centered in the inscrutable but certain love of God. "I 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.