



Sunday, July 23, 2017

Rev. Robert W. Brown
The Dream Catcher

A combined summer worship with West Concord Union Church

Genesis 28:10-19 New Living Translation (NLT)

INTRODUCTION:

The book of Genesis is foundational to understanding the entire Bible. In Genesis we learn about God's relationship to creation, God's relationship to humankind, and humankind's relationship to one another. We learn about the one true God who is sovereign over all that exists, and also, a God that makes extravagant covenants with humans. God pledges love and faithfulness to people and asks us to promise the same in return. In Genesis, we read epic, archetypical stories of struggle, betrayal, sin and redemption.

The story of Jacob is one such story. Jacob began his adulthood as a conspiring, selfish, manipulative young man. He even betrays his own twin brother, Esau. Eventually though, Jacob becomes consumed with guilt and shame about what he has done. With good reason, he fears his brother's fierce anger and violent retribution. The pressure and anxiety escalates, so a terrified Jacob flees his homeland in search of a way to somehow restart his life, exiled in a foreign land.

Hear this *Word of God* for the people of God... Genesis chapter 28 verses 10 through 19.

¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and traveled toward Haran. ¹¹ At sundown he arrived at a good place to set up camp and stopped there for the night. Jacob found a stone to rest his head against and lay down to sleep. ¹² As he slept, he dreamed of a stairway that reached from the earth up to heaven. And he saw the angels of God going up and down the stairway.

¹³ At the top of the stairway stood the Lord, and he said, "I am the Lord, the God of your grandfather Abraham, and the God of your father, Isaac. The ground you are lying on belongs to you. I am giving it to you and your descendants. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth! They will spread out in all directions—to the west and the east, to the north and the south. And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants. ¹⁵ What's more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you."

¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I wasn't even aware of it!" ¹⁷ But he was also afraid and said, "What an awesome place this is! It is none other than the house of God, the very gateway to heaven!"

¹⁸ The next morning Jacob got up very early. He took the stone he had rested his head against, and he set it upright as a memorial pillar. Then he poured olive oil over it. ¹⁹ He named that place Bethel (which means “house of God”), although it was previously called Luz.

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This summer at TriCon Church we've been talking a lot about engaging in Spiritual Practices and sharing the ways we connect to God. We've discovered that many of us are, in fact, practicing methods of connecting with God in a great variety of ways. It's been enlightening to notice and name the various techniques that each of use to awaken to the Divine Presence that surrounds us.

On Thursday night, as we sat around tables here in the parish hall, gorging on amazing desserts and sharing our experience with Spiritual Practices, I noticed that a lot of us felt like we don't practice as much as we should. We think it would be good to be more intentional or more disciplined in our practice.

Does anyone else feel that way?

We RANK our spiritual fitness like our physical fitness discipline or diet regiments. We know we should do more but...you know. It seems to me that when it comes to nurturing our connection to God, most of us feel somewhere between insufficient and grossly pathetic. Great, another thing to feel guilty about!

Today, I want to suggest that we give ourselves a break. Maybe we can just release the idea that we've failed the fitness test in our inadequate personal search for God. Wouldn't that be nice?

But first let us pray...

*Spirit of the Living God, fill us with your wisdom and insight this morning. May my words and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you our Rock and our Redeemer. AMEN*

Nadia Bolz Weber, is a widely celebrated, sarcastic, self-effacing and brilliantly cynical Lutheran minister. Recently someone asked her what spiritual practice she employs to stay close to God. Her answer was SHOCKING and on the money.

*"Why would I want to get close to God? Whenever Jesus gets close to me I end up having to love someone I hate, give away more of my money, or forgive someone I don't want to forgive. In my life it feels more like God comes after me."*

I think Jacob's story lines up well with Nadia's relationship with God. In fact, when you read the Bible you will find that many of these Bible stories are NOT about faithful warriors who stand tall against the enemy and overcome through disciplined prayer and fasting. The great biblical heroes generally seem to begin with resistant, agitated, edgy people who don't fit in well with good church folk. But then, God surprisingly shows up in the most unexpected places to the most unlikely people and disrupts everything in the lives of these troubled people who, for the most part, aren't even seeking religion. They aren't anywhere near what we think of as holy, but God refuses to leave them alone. The pattern I notice is that this may not be so much about humans seeking God but about God finding us and not letting go. Our God won't take "no" for an answer.

You've got to read Jacob's story yourself in Geneses, but trust me; it's clear the man was far away from any desire or need for connection with any God. In today's religious circles he'd be categorized as "secular, un-churched, or non-affiliated". In other words, today he'd be normal, like most of your neighbors. But on top of that, over time, Jacob had descended into a dishonest scoundrel of a man. He was a consistent liar, a cheat, and thief. It seemed that his self-interest could justify the worst behavior. He even ran a con on his own twin brother, the honest, hard-working Esau. The scam went so well that it made Jacob wealthy and powerful while obliterating Esau's fortune!

But you know, even when someone gets away with mean vindictive behavior and can somehow justify their cheating, sooner or later, the seeds of guilt will always begin to take root. Then, trust erodes and relationships crumble. Before long, the guilt piles up and then, more often than not, guilt transforms into shame and shame will redefine your self-identity. You no longer see yourself as a good person who sometimes crosses the line for the greater good. You define yourself as fundamentally a bad person, unredeemable, unworthy, unwanted, and unlovable.

I imagine Jacob was feeling all of that guilt and shame. Also, I'll bet he knew that if he had been the victim of betrayal, he'd be looking for bloody revenge. The suspicion deepens to paranoia that breeds a persistent fear and anxiety. Before long Jacob is totally convinced that his only option is either to murder Esau or run for the hills.

He quickly packs his bags, apparently forgetting his pillow. To get some distance, he pushes hard that first day. When night falls he is totally spent. Exhausted, he flops to the ground settling for stone to rest upon and falls fast asleep. He dreams of angels climbing up and down a ladder between heaven and earth. In the dream, he looks up to see at the top of the ladder, the Lord Jehovah, Yahweh her self, peering down at him. I can only imagine Jacob's terror in that moment. Like when you cutting 7th

grade math class to smoke your first cigarette and run right into your mother. But look what happens! Does God say, "I know who you are and I know what you've done! NO! God says...

*"I am the Lord, the God of your grandfather Abraham, and the God of your father, Isaac. The ground you are lying on belongs to you. I am giving it to you and your descendants. Your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth! ... And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants.*

*What's more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you."*

God makes no mention what-so-ever of Jacob's many sins. God does not define Jacob by his mistakes. She sees right past it and instead lifts up the real man that she knows he is and will most certainly become. The shadow side is temporary and completely redeemable. Not even worth mentioning. Like the Mom who gently takes the cigarette, crushes it out and says you need to get back to school because you are going to be great one day. I know you and love you so start again. You are worthy and beautiful and there is nothing you can do that will change my mind about that.

This is the God that pursues us, who is with us and will protect us wherever we go. The God portrayed in the Bible will never define you by your mistakes because love is the only path toward real and lasting inner change. Encountering God redeems all sins. Guilt trips, shaming, and forceful dominance might cause compliance, but never will it cause true transformation. That only happens when we somehow awaken to the reality of God's fierce and abiding love for us.

Jacob wakes up. He is totally stunned and immediately knows that he must reorient his life. He must go in a different direction and he does. The rest of his story also reveals the inevitable consequences of his misguided actions. God doesn't cause them. He has brought them on himself.

What I see in Jacob's dream is that God shows up in the most surprising places, to the most unlikely people. This is the best news possible to me because I'm more like Jacob than I care to admit. It's such a relief to me to read in scripture that GOD comes to broken people and that there is no place on earth or heaven or hell that God won't show up. It's not at all dependent on my spiritual fitness!

Let it go!

Our true spiritual practice only comes as a *result* of tasting God's goodness and being hungry for more.

Jacob wakes up with his mind completely blown away. He has experienced perfect love and blurts out, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I wasn't even aware of it!" But notice that it says that he was also afraid. Encountering grace and the complete, pure, overwhelming love that God has for you will fill you with a disorienting terror, because you realize this immense power is only good and knows you by name. Despite all you've done or haven't done, God is for you! Even when you skip the gym, break the diet, get fired for being late, or forget to pray grace. Through hot tears Jacob says, "*What an awesome place this is! It is none other than the house of God, the very gateway to heaven!*"

Jacobs dream teaches us that whatever state we find ourselves in, we are never beyond God's reach. In strength or weakness, sorrow or joy, God is always present, seeking every one of us out. No person, place or thing is Godless. Nothing is beyond redemption.

Psalm 139 says it all... (*different readers for each line*)

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.

You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.

You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to you;

the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.

See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.