

"Grace"
August 23, 2020
St. Paul's UCC Church
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

Genesis 28:10-19a

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. 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. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. 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; 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. 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." Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place — and I did not know it!" 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."

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.

Poor Jacob. He's having a really rough time. Homeless, frightened, alone, unsettled...

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Do you remember the story of Jacob, from the book of Genesis? Jacob is twins with Esau, and he and his brother have been at it from the very beginning. They fight with each other all the time, each striving to be "top dog." But Jacob is not only a fighter, he is also a conniver, a trickster, and when he is a young man, he tricks his twin Esau into handing over Esau's birthright in exchange for some soup and bread. And then, later, when the twins' father Isaac is on his deathbed, Jacob tricks *him*, resulting in old blind Isaac giving Jacob the blessing, the birthright, that was originally intended for Esau.

As you can imagine, Jacob's twin Esau is pretty upset by tall his. Esau is so upset, in fact, that he vows that very moment: "The days of mourning for my father are approaching; but after that, I will kill my brother Jacob." Them's fightin' words!

The twins' mother Rebekah, clever woman that she is, overhears Esau's oath, and immediately runs to tell Jacob. "Son, your brother is *furious*. I just heard him say that is out for you blood. Listen to me carefully: you need to leave this place as quickly as possible. You need to go, just as fast as you can, down to my folks' place, way down in Ur. Can you do that for me, son? Now go."

Jacob rushes to gather as many belongings as he can, throws them into a duffle bag (or, the rough equivalent), receives another quick blessing from his father, and gets the heck out of dodge, just as fast as his little legs can carry him.

And that's where our story picks up for today.

Today, we meet Jacob on the run, fleeing from the wrath of his brother, fearing for his life. Because of his brother's anger, Jacob can't go home – it's way too dangerous there. But the place to where he is fleeing to – even though his mom's kinsfolk live there – is not familiar to Jacob at all. He has never been down there, and, for all he knows, it might as well be the far side of the moon.

Poor Jacob. He's having a really rough time. Homeless, frightened, alone, unsettled...

Of course, we can't feel too sorry for Jacob, right? After all, he's brought a lot of this on himself. Let's not forget how he has connived, and tricked, and been driven by greed and anger. Here's a man who has deceived his father and cheated his brother, who has fought and struggled and ultimately stolen something that never rightfully belonged to him in the first place. Maybe he deserves to be on the run. Maybe he deserves to feel frightened and alone. Maybe he deserves all this darkness.

As evening approaches, Jacob stumbles, worn out, into a place that he finally far enough away from his brother to safely spend the night. He's so dog-tired, though, that he doesn't even bother to gather leaves for a pillow. He just lays his weary head down on a rock before falling into an exhausted heap. Maybe regretting what he has done. Maybe wondering how he could have done it all differently...maybe not. We don't know what he's thinking.

But that's when everything changes.

During the night, as he sleeps, Jacob has a strange dream. He dreams that there is a ladder, with angels ascending and descending upon it. He dreams that God appears to him, not far away, not looking down on Jacob from the heavens on high; but God appears right beside him, right there next to him, closer to him than his very own breath.

And God not only appears to Jacob, God speaks to Jacob. God speaks of promise, of comfort, of blessing. God speaks of home. God says, "I am the God of your ancestors. But not only of your ancestors, I am *your* God, too, Jacob. And, Jacob, I want to bless you with land, and with children. I want you to live long and to know that I am your God. I want you to know that I am with you and will keep you. I want you to know that I am your home, my beloved child, and I'm not going anywhere."

Jacob wakes with a start, rubs his eyes, looks around, and exclaims, "Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not even know it!" Jacob is so overwhelmed, so breathless with the glory of God still clinging to him like dew, that he grabs the nearest object – which just happens to be the stone he had been using as a pillow – and anoints it with oil. Praising God all the while, Jacob names the place Bethel, which means "House of God."

“Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!” Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it. This is what Jacob cries out in his fear, in his darkness. This is what Jacob the conniver, Jacob the cheat, Jacob the greedy one, utters after his vision of God. Such beautiful words from such a broken man.

When reflecting on Jacob’s story in her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris tells a story of her own. She writes:

One morning this past spring I noticed a young couple with an infant at an airport departure gate. The baby was staring intently at other people, and as soon as he recognized a human face, no matter whose it was, no matter if it was young or old, pretty or ugly, bored or happy or worried-looking, he would respond with absolute delight.

It was beautiful to see. Our drab departure gate had become the gate of heaven. And as I watched that baby... I felt as awe-struck as Jacob, because I realized that this is how God looks at us...

I suspect that only God, and well-loved infants, can see this way. But it gives me hope to think that when God gazed on the sleeping Jacob, God looked right through the tough little schemer and saw something good... That Jacob will worship badly, trying to bargain with God, does seem to matter. God promises to be with him always.¹

Isn’t this what Jacob means when he utters, “Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!” Isn’t he saying that *God has been with him the whole time*? Even before Jacob knew it or named it, God was there. Even as Jacob schemed and cheated his way through life, even as he has run from those he has hurt, God was there. Even as he has stumbled into this new darkness, this uncharted territory, God was there. In other words, Jacob is declaring that God was there, and has *always* been there, offering him undeserved forgiveness, offering him unmerited love.

And isn’t this what grace is? Undeserved forgiveness. Unmerited love.

Do you know you are loved this way, too? With a grace that will not let you go?

Kathleen Norris writes:

Peter denied Jesus, and Saul persecuted the early Christians, but God could see the apostles they would become. God does not punish Jacob as he lies sleeping because God can see in him Israel, the foundation of a people. God loves to look at us, and loves it when we look back at God. Even when we try to run away from our troubles, as Jacob did, God will find us, and bless us, even when we feel most alone, unsure if we’ll survive the night.²

¹ Norris, Kathleen, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books, New York, 1998), pp. 150-151.

² *Ibid*, p. 151.

The night is long, people of God. Especially now. We are broken people, who have messed up, become afraid, even run away at times. We are in uncharted, and sometimes very dark, territory.

But our God gazes at us like that infant at the airport gate: with pure delight. Granting us undeserved forgiveness. Filling us with unmerited love. We don't deserve this grace, but we've got it.

And, just like Jacob, we will survive the night.

Thanks be to God.