

Jacob Meets His Match

Genesis 29:15-28

For the past couple of months we've been making our way through the stories of the Patriarchs and we are coming to the end in the next few weeks as we wind up the stories of Jacob. If we began last week's sermon with the question, "Was it worth it?" was it worth stealing his brother's birthright and inheritance if he then had to flee for his life, then this week's sermon probably should begin with the question, "What did Jacob imagine it would be like?"

Last week we heard how God came to Jacob in a dream, not with a deal or a command, but with a promise, a bunch of promises: Jacob would inherit the land on which he slept, and his children would be so numerous that they would completely fill that land; God would be with Jacob, and Jacob would be blessed. Life would be good. Life would be great, heck! Especially considering what Jacob deserved to get instead, he couldn't have imagined that life could get any better. A homestead as big as Montana and a big, happy family with God watching out for them, keeping cattle rustlers and calamities of all sorts at bay.

And here, only days later, as if in confirmation of the promise, Jacob arrives at Laban's and within minutes his eyes fall on Rachel. His heart begins to pound and his mouth goes dry and he suddenly can't remember his own name. It is love at first sight, and not only that, it is a sign that all that God promised is about to come true. The parade of blessings is about to start rolling in. Jacob is in heaven. He lives for glimpses of her during the day, he dreams about her at night, and when the moment presents itself the Wheeler-dealer strikes a bargain with Laban – seven years of labor in exchange for the hand of beautiful Rachel, maybe not what you or I might consider a great deal, but in language more befitting a romance novel than scripture, we are told that to Jacob, those seven years seemed 'but a few days' because of his love for her. And then, at long last, the big day finally comes and his bride is brought to his tent, and... "Behold, it was Leah!"

With sunrise on the first day as a married man, Jacob's blessed world comes crashing down around him. Instead of the life he has spent 7 years dreaming of, working for, instead of the life he thought was promised to him by God, he gets the Bible's biggest headache yet: he's shafted by Laban who tells him, "yes, well, I don't know how it is where you come from, but around here birth order counts for something, and the first born has, shall we say, certain privileges over his or her younger siblings (ironic, isn't it?)." He gets two wives, who, from the moment each says "I do" are doomed to a life of jealousy and animosity. And just to rub a little extra salt in the wound, Jacob gets 14 years of practically indentured servitude to a man he now knows he can't trust any further than he can throw him. His life of blessing isn't turning out at all the way he thought a life of blessing would.

What does it mean to be blessed by God? That's the question this story asks. I have an idea that our own belief systems don't stray too far from Jacob's and his idea of what

a life blessed by God must look like. It is a theology that was prevalent in parts of the Old Testament. If you were blessed by God, it was evidenced in material bounty and good health. You could see God's favor. It even shows up in the New Testament in the story about the man who was born blind when the disciples asked Jesus who sinned, the man's mother or father, that God had done this to him. If you were in God's favor then your sheep would be numerous and your children would be healthy and your wives would all be beautiful and get along with each other and not make your life a living nightmare.

Or to modernize it and Christianize it a bit, you and I might say that God's blessing and oversight show up in the form of kind and wonderful in-laws, and a conflict- and debt-free church family, and familial relationships that are the stuff of Hallmark greeting cards, and cars that run to 250,000 miles without ever needing so much as a new water pump. Your devotional life is always exciting and meaningful and you can't wait to jump out of bed to begin each day with time with God, who invariably answers your prayers and never leaves you questioning or doubting.

But then stories like this one come along and they force us to re-think what divine protection and blessing look like, don't they? We think and hope that divine blessing and protection means bliss and a life full of Kum Ba Ya moments, but clearly, that can't be the case. In fact, I can't think of a single instance where God promised someone a pain- and strife-free existence. He sure didn't promise Jesus one, and if Jesus didn't get one then we certainly don't.

Ultimately, that question has to be about more than just the definition of blessing. If you ask what it means to be blessed, then you also have to ask about the purposes of God. What is God about? What is God doing in the grand scheme of things? I think God has two purposes, and they are interdependent, you can't have one without the other. The first is a larger, global purpose, to re-shape or redeem the world, and the other is personal: to reshape or redeem us.

Like it or not, God's not a doting, indulgent grandparent. We talk and talk about God's grace and mercy around here, but what we forget is that God still expects better of us. God is perfectly willing to forgive what we have been and done, but God also expects us to change. We can't stay the same kind of people we were, with the same flaws and failures and priorities and pastimes and desires if we are going to call ourselves God's people. God has new people for us to become – Abram is to become Abraham, Jacob is to become Israel, Simon is to become Peter, Saul is to become Paul.

And what would be nice, quite nice, is if being spoiled rotten, or at least pampered a good bit, is what gave us the motivation to change and become better people; kinder, more generous and thoughtful and loving and faithful people. Give us a pony or a shiny new car or every heart's desire, and we will be inspired to be more like Jesus. Sadly, but not surprising, I suppose, it usually takes a few hard knocks to get our attention and teach us something about ourselves and inspire us to want to be something different, better. Paul had to be struck blind for a few days and have a heart to heart

conversation with the risen Jesus. Abram had to wander the world for 25 years. Jacob had to be out-tricked, to get a taste of his own medicine and knocked down a few pegs before he could be shaped into a fitting sort of patriarch of a grand new nation. Mark Vonnegut is the son of the novelist Kurt Vonnegut, and he is also a well-respected pediatrician in Boston despite having bi-polar disorder and being hospitalized several times for psychotic breaks. In his new memoir he writes that, "It's probably possible to gain humility by means other than repeated humiliation, but repeated humiliation works very well." He might just as well have been writing about Jacob. Or us.

Now, does that mean that God told Laban to switch out the sisters so he could teach Jacob a lesson? I don't believe that. There is plenty of biblical evidence to suggest that Laban was quite capable of such trickery all on his own. God isn't about the business of giving us cancer and swallowing up houses in earthquakes or using scam artists to bilk us out of our money, but God doesn't always protect us from them either. The world is full of difficult and dishonest people, and hazards in the road, and unstable financial markets and all kinds of perilous, humbling, and patience-trying situations, and if we let them, those crises can become the incubators of our spiritual life. If we let them those are the very events and times that will help us grow into the sorts of people God intended for us to be; they'll help us rid ourselves of pride and greed and anger, and take on qualities like compassion, and trust, and love, and patience and humility.

So, back to that earlier question: what does it mean to be blessed and watched over by God? Maybe it means that God loves us so much that he doesn't leave us alone; he doesn't let us keep on being the sort of people that we are inclined to be. Maybe it means God loves us enough to let us be uncomfortable and make mistakes and struggle a bit, because those are the soul's proving grounds.

Jacob was blessed by God. It may not have been all that he had hoped it was going to be, but after all, God blesses us for his purposes, not ours.