Sermon for Sunday, July 23, 2023

The essential question that is posed by today's reading from Genesis is an eternal one: can people change?

More specifically, can Jacob, this deceiver, this heel, this deeply unpleasant person, live into what he has gained dishonestly? Can he be the one who deserves the birthright inheritance, who deserves his father's blessing, who deserves to be particularly called upon by God in this ages-long story?

All of this is placed in the context of running for his life, because Esau, rightfully upset with what was stolen from him by his younger brother, wants to kill him. His mother Rebekah has told him he needed to get out of town, to head to where her brother Laban lived in Haran, while things cooled down. Little did Jacob know that he would be gone for two decades, and would never see his mother again.

But he ran, sleeping out in the open, hoping to put enough distance between himself and Esau so that he could survive. He was running for his life.

Maybe it's only when we are running for our lives, literally or figuratively, that we are broken open enough to see ourselves as God sees us, to hear God's words as God speaks them.

Out under the stars, a stone as a pillow, he tries to sleep. He is without the safety of a tent or companions. Jacob dreams of God's messengers, angels, going up and down a ladder getting messages, delivering them, reporting back to God. Jacob hears God speaking to him. God, knowing that Jacob needed to hear it, introduces himself.

"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."

God is repeating the very promise that God made to Abraham and to Isaac. And this time God is making the promise to this seemingly incredibly unworthy person. It's like God is validating the bad behavior, which is a real head scratcher.

And yet, when Jacob wakes up from this dream sequence, there is a difference: he is afraid. Perhaps for the first time, Jacob actually sees himself and his unworthiness and the very fact that the Lord is speaking to him in the dream is awesome and awful at the same time.

This may be one of the earliest reported experiences of the phenomenon we call "imposter syndrome," when we don't believe we're really prepared to do what we've convinced others we can do. We feel it even when we actually are capable, because we know we are human and we are flawed and we've failed at other things and in other times. What will make us capable when we know deep down that we've conned everyone, that we're not really able?

And Jacob feels that, and feels his smallness under that vast desert sky full of stars.

Here's the one thing, the only thing, that Jacob is sure of: God was and is present in this lonely corner of Jacob's world. God – GOD – is there. He cannot be sure that he is capable to live into any of the promises that God has made to him, but he knows God is present.

It's a start.

So to mark this place where this shocking experience has occurred, he makes a little altar. It's just that stone that he used for a pillow. He pours oil on it, anointing it. He names the place Beth El, the house of God.

Now when you think about that naming, it's interesting. House of God. When you think of the phrase House of God, what comes to mind? Maybe this place, maybe Washington National Cathedral, maybe St Peter's in Rome or the Duomo in Florence…but not a rock in the sand with some oil poured on it.

Here's the secret: Jacob has been changed in a fundamental way by this dream, and has begun a journey not just to Haran, but to a deeper understanding of who he is, how he is, who God is, and what he's supposed to do. He is the House of God, fully aware of God's presence now. The least likely of Beth Els, this royal pain in the tuchus, this liar, this cheat, now told by God what his future holds.

He is the House of God, just as each and every one of us is the House of God, carrying the divine spark within us, despite our own doubts and fears.

Are we capable of what God expects of us? Each of us our own set of doubts, our own imposter syndrome moments. Each of us sees our failings all too clearly. And yet God comes to us, perhaps not as spectacularly as God does in this story, but God does indeed come to us, and tells us we are to do what we were created for: to witness to the goodness of our Divine Creator, to transform the failings and pain and hurt of the world we were given into something true to God's will. And when God tells us that, however we hear it, we are compelled to act, to do, to change, to fix our own brokenness as well as the brokenness of the world.

The very thought of that kicks up my own feelings of imposter syndrome and unworthiness and lack of gifts big time. But I find myself thinking of big projects in which I've participated in the past: Habitat for Humanity projects, mission trips with teens to Appalachia to refit trailer homes, missions to rebuild homes damaged by flooding, Katrina trips. Let me be perfectly clear here: I am not a construction worker. I am not all that adept with power tools. But I learned I could be part of a group where each of us brought our own skills and were willing to learn new things. In Pascagoula Mississippi I learned how to hang drywall and mud it and sand it smooth. I taught others the right way to paint a wall. In Tazewell, I learned how to use a tile saw. In Johnstown I learned how to get a teenager with a nail in his foot to an ER in a town I didn't know. Because that's what you do, right? You grow into the work that God tells you is yours to do. Jacob, the trickster and heel, is growing into his own new way of being. Jacob is changing, not into something new, but into being who he was at heart all along, even though he's still figuring it out.

God promises, God teaches, God directs, and God also gives us the room to grow into God's expectations.

If Jacob could, so could I. So could you. And if we all listen and do, sharing what gifts we have, what might we accomplish? Amen.