

May 3, 2009
Living in the World ... for Jesus
Genesis 28:10-22

Remember Jacob? He and Esau are the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah, but Esau is just a bit older. Back in February we left Jacob swindling his twin, Esau, out of his birthright, the honour and double portion of the inheritance that comes from being the firstborn (*Genesis 25:27-34*). Later Jacob (with his mother, Rebekah's complicity) connives to steal their father's, Isaac's, blessing from Esau (*Genesis 27*). Let's be honest: Jacob (and his mother, Rebekah) are deceitful, dishonest, conniving people! The Bible never condones their behaviour nor does it sugar-coat or try to put a positive spin on their choices. They sin.

God is the same yesterday, today, and forever: His standards of holiness and justice back then are the same yesterday, today, and forever, too. Their behaviour was evil back then; it would be evil today. There is no approval, anywhere else in Scripture, of Jacob's amoral behaviour.

Good news for a messed-up man

What does God do with a wretch like Jacob? God, in His grace, is in the business of saving sinful people. In our reading today, as Jacob heads off to find a wife from among his mother's family, God appears to him in a dream. No one - not even a sneak thief like Jacob - is beyond the touch of God's love. That is good news. Great news. That God is still at work in Jacob's life is not an endorsement of his choices, but an affirmation of God's relentless love - even for sinful people.

Often when we think of "the good news" or "the gospel" we stop right there. The good news is that God loves all people - even sinful people. So if we believe in Jesus, our sins are forgiven, we go to heaven when we die and all is well. Right? Yes, that is all "right." That is good news. But that is not what God says to Jacob. That is only part of the good news. There is more ...

What does God say? The Lord reiterates to Jacob the same promise He had made to Abraham - there would be a blessing for all people on the earth through his family. From the beginning, God apparently intended to work out His blessing through Jacob, not Esau. The Lord had spoken (somehow) to Rebekah back before her boys were born: "*The sons in your womb will become two nations. From the very beginning, the two nations will be rivals. One nation will be stronger than the other; and your older son will serve your younger son*" (24:23).

The good news for Jacob is that God does care about him, can forgive his sin, and can extend His love and grace to him. But the bigger picture good news is that God is on a mission, and He has a place within that mission for Jacob. Jacob has a purpose, a call, a mission in life that God does not want anyone else to fill. And despite Jacob's bumbling and mistakes, God is not about to give up on him and choose someone else. Jacob is his choice, and He's sticking with him.

What about me? Is it possible that God might have a role for me to play in the life of His kingdom, a role that no one else can play? Is it possible that despite my stumbling and blundering, God might still have a purpose for me? Is it possible that God is not about to give up on me and choose someone else?

Life lessons from Jacob

Life lesson 1: Trust

Had Jacob changed history by stealing Esau's birthright and blessing? Had Jacob now seized the opportunity to receive what should have been Esau's thanks to his own sharp wits? No ... God was planning to bless the world through Jacob anyway!

Jacob could have known the pure joy of being blessed, allowing God to work miracles in and through his life. Instead, Jacob creates (dis)stress by stealing from his brother; he destroys his relationship with his closest relative (Esau wanted to kill Jacob [Genesis 27:41]); he (undoubtedly) carries a huge burden of guilt and fear ... What a miserable life Jacob creates for himself and others. It didn't have to be! God was going to bless him anyway!

Why do I try so hard to twist things to my advantage? Can I live with integrity, righteousness, purity, honesty, etc ... and simply accept the blessings God brings my way? This is not a call to passivity but to godliness - a way of living with no compromise - and trust - where I say, with sincerity, "Your will be done." Then I am free to live courageously, trusting God, not myself ...

Life lesson 2: Connection to God

This image of "Jacob's Ladder" is intriguing. It emphasizes is the sense of connectedness we can feel in relation to God. God is not some impersonal being "way out there." We know Him personally and powerfully through the person and presence of the Holy Spirit.

However there still is a difference between ourselves and God. This dream highlights that God is God and I am human ... and there is a world of difference between us.

We live in this tension between a sense of radical connectedness with God - knowing and loving God as our intimate friend, in His indwelling personal presence as Holy Spirit - and a sense of incomprehensible distance - finding ourselves at the foot of the ladder, aware of the awesomeness and glory of almighty God: Creator and King. There is tremendous comfort having God as our companion ... also knowing He is power and majesty, King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

Life Lesson 3: Steps of faith

Our life with God often has milestones on it. Times when something happened - good or bad - and we knew and discovered the power, glory, and grace of God in special ways. We sometimes mark these times with rededications, or baptism, or some other symbolic event. Those are good things.

Important things. People in the Old Testament are always setting up stones or building altars to commemorate special encounters with God. Why? How can we do that?

Life Lesson 4: God is with you

"Surely the LORD is in this place, and I wasn't even aware of it!" (Genesis 28:16). That is the reality of our lives. God is in "this place" - whatever "this place" is, wherever "this place" is. Jacob's final vow (vs. 20-22) reveals that he is struggling to come to terms with this. He isn't sure yet that God will provide for him. But God's promise is "I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go ... I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you." (When will His promise be finished? Never!)

Is that really good news?

As we read God's blessing to Jacob, it certainly sounds like good news: *"I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you."* God's promises sound wonderful! But what is God promising? Wealth? Land? No ... God does not call Jacob (or any of us) to an end state of wealth (if that is your life goal, get over it!). God is entrusting His mission and purpose to Jacob! This is a huge responsibility (if I were God I might have chosen a more trustworthy individual, but God goes with Jacob, in spite of his track record!). As we shall see, Jacob's life is not going to be an easy one. Having the call is going to be inconvenient, costly, and challenging. There are advantages to simply being a "pew potato" - someone who just sits back and watches everyone else do it all. But unfortunately that is not an option for any of us. We are all called to "disciples" - followers, students, apprentices - of Jesus ... and that calls us into a lifestyle that will be costly, inconvenient, and challenging, too.

A couple of weeks ago, many of us were led in a very thought provoking "Re-dedication" service: *"As a Christ-centered community, our mission is to know Christ and make Him known.' Our entire staff is dedicated to teaching us and encouraging us to strive to do just that. Let us re-dedicate ourselves to this purpose for which we are called. The apostle Peter, in his first epistle, reminds us that we are all ministers of the gospel: 'But we are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God's instruments to do his work and speak out for him, to tell others of the night-and-day difference he made for us - from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted" (1 Peter 2:9-10).*

"Every Christian has a vocation. We are all called to share in the ministry of Jesus Christ in and through the world. ... (This gives us) both a clear identity in the world and a sense of purpose about what our lives are ultimately for. Sharing in the ministry of Jesus Christ involves living in the world as an expression of the holiness we see in him—holiness expressed through his compassion, his concern for justice (righteousness), and through his healing and reconciling presence in the world. The relationship he offers - when entered into with seriousness - results in those qualities we see in him being expressed through us, sometimes even despite ourselves. We cannot, therefore, limit this expression to a particular profession, or a particular role, or a particular job. (from Invitation to Holiness by James C. Fenhagen)

I believe each and everyone of us has the call and responsibility to be an ambassador for Christ - in our homes, workplaces, neighbourhoods, schools, etc - through how we live, act, talk, etc., etc. We all have a story to share. And we have a calling to live a life of love, compassion, service, and holiness. Mission and outreach is an approach to life and lifestyle, recognizing and taking advantage of the "missional" moments along the way - as much, or more, than a program.

At our recent denominational assembly, Gary Nelson, General Secretary of Canadian Baptist Ministries, challenged us to recognize that being a disciple of Jesus in these days calls for a radical commitment to Christ: *"In a world where a terrorist straps explosives around herself and blows herself up in a restaurant, lukewarm commitment to Jesus doesn't cut it any more."* He's right, of course. We're called to live our faith in our homes, communities, and the global world.

At our April Council Meeting we talked about local ministries we are involved in, as a church and individually. Among the ones we talked about were the soup kitchen, adult drop in, food bank, seniors' home ministries, LCI outreach, meals to new moms, IVCF, crossroads counseling, Mom's group, Youth Emergency shelter, Alzheimer's Society, victim services, new Canadians ministry, reading in schools, coaching, working with community organizations, etc. Lots of good things, great things! But do people on the street see Jesus in us as we do this? Does the same spirit that burned in the hearts of the early disciples burn in us as we do this? Do we do this "in the name of Jesus"? Or are we just a service club with a creed?

Yes, I need to learn

- To trust God
- To love God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength
- To recognize and mark step of faith in my life
- That God is with me

These are not for my benefit. They are for the glory of God's Kingdom. *"We are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God's instruments to do his work and speak out for him, to tell others of the night-and-day difference he made for us - from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted."*

This leads us to *Life Lesson #5: Being a disciple leads us to action and risk*: Jacob is on a journey - he doesn't know where or how it is going to progress. In the past, his pattern has been to gerrymander things to work out to his advantage. Now he is stepping out with a new confidence, new faith, a new relationship with God. What about me? Does God have a role for me to play in the life of His kingdom? Absolutely. Who is God calling me to be? Am I willing to do things that will be costly, inconvenient, and challenging? What risk is he calling me to take?