

“Encountering the Holy”

August 13, 2017

In the Beginning: (God’s) Family Drama series

In our journey through Genesis, we’ve come to Abraham’s grandsons - Jacob and Esau. Perhaps you remember the drama they were in. Jacob manipulated his brother, Esau, out of his birthright. We wanted Jacob to be duly punished, and I promised that Jacob’s life wouldn’t be so easy. Today we find him on the run. He’s a fugitive after he tricks his father, Isaac, into giving him a special blessing meant for Esau.

But even with his “success,” Jacob is at a very low point. He’s been grabbing at God’s promises all along, and it just gets worse as time goes on! Now he’s been sent to Rebekah’s side of the family to find a wife - and to stay safe from Esau’s wrath.

Isaac and Rebekah hope that the journey will give time for Esau to cool down – and not follow through on his plan to kill Jacob. Yes, Jacob has the birthright and the blessing. But he’s wandering all alone – probably the most vulnerable time in his life. His safety and his future are at stake.

We were challenged to see ourselves in the raw conflict between Jacob and Esau. We talked about birthright – about truly claiming the gifts of God in our lives and holding onto the hope we find in God. We saw the dangers of instant gratification – of giving up the future for temporary satisfaction. We were challenged to deal with our regrets in a productive way – to turn them over to God and live in victory because God is always faithful to the promise.

We struggled to understand how God works in such mysterious ways, even when it doesn’t seem fair. How could God allow Jacob to hold the promise? But we also celebrated that God doesn’t love because of who we are, but because of who God is.

Abraham and Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau. Jacob isn’t the first in his family to lie, cheat, and steal to get ahead. But the amazing thing is that God calls him and keeps the promise. It ought to give us great hope that God offers the covenant even to people like us! It ought to give us great joy that God pursues a relationship with us!

I’m always ready for God to chew Jacob out when he’s finally all alone. There are some things that God could bring up to remind Jacob of his faults. But instead, God offers the covenant. God promises of land and prosperity even though Jacob is as undeserving as they come. He has been living his whole life taking what’s not rightfully his, and suddenly God is giving him something more wonderful than he can imagine! Jacob finds reassurance of God’s care at a time when he’s desperate for it.

How gracious God is – to work with the likes of Jacob and bless him. Jacob is blessed with a God encounter. The boundary between heaven and earth becomes very blurry, and he has a dream of angels walking up and down a staircase between heaven and earth. God speaks to him of blessings. And God says, “I will be with you” – quite a relief considering that Jacob is in danger both at home and as he travels to Haran.

God isn’t far off from Jacob. God is the same God who was with Abraham. God is active in Jacob’s life and wants him to acknowledge God. God is accessible at all times and in all places. God is a promise-keeper.

Notice what Jacob does after the dream and encounter with God. He marks the place and worships God. He makes a memorial as a place for an altar to be built to God. The presence of God is real, and he wants to make sure that others who pass by that place know that God has been there – that someone has encountered God there. And he promises to give a tithe – to give one-tenth of his wealth – to God.

Some would say this is the point of Jacob’s conversion. But it’s funny that Jacob bargains with God even after this pronouncement of good fortune and successful life. I wonder if Jacob has to get used to the idea of receiving something rather than taking it! Perhaps he struggles like we do - to truly understand the nature of God’s grace - that’s it’s a gift that we receive - not something we take. God gives grace freely, willingly - not because we deserve it or because we’ve earned it, not because we’ve been good enough.

Yet we have to hear Jacob’s words for what they are. His statement is powerful. **SHOW SLIDE:** “God is in this place – truly. And I didn’t even know it.” This isn’t a question as much as it is a realization. Jacob experiences an awareness of God’s presence that he didn’t have before.

Have you ever said something like that? When have you had God encounters – when it seemed that God came near? When you were changed?

This is Jacob’s first mention of God. He has a different relationship with God – a personal faith and commitment. So even in jeopardy, he has something to count on. God is with him wherever he goes.

Maybe you and I can relate. Many times, it’s at the lowest points of our lives that God is most present – or at least God seems the most present. God is always there – but it’s in those moments of struggle and hardship when we sit up and take notice. It’s been said that when you get to your wit’s end, you’ll find God there.

Finally Jacob was at a point where all of the cheating and conniving he could do couldn’t give him the assurance and hope he needed. He had the birthright and the blessing, but that wasn’t enough. Only an encounter with God could give him perspective on who he was and who God is. Now he has his own understanding of God

- different from his grandfather, Abraham, or his father, Isaac. This is Jacob's profession of faith. This is his moment of confirmation.

Some of us can point to a moment like this, and some of us might struggle to point to it. But I wonder when we've had that inkling of God's presence in a new way - or a new awareness of it. When have we claimed that relationship for ourselves - not based on someone else's experience, but on our own sense of God's presence?

I don't think God changed here, but Jacob did. There's a sense that he's less self-centered and more God-centered. Our encounters with God - however big or small - are powerful reminders that our life isn't our own, though we have the freedom to live it. Ultimately, our life belongs to God.

Jacob strived for so long to win God's promises, but God finds him in his sleep - in the most vulnerable state he could possibly be. Even though Jacob carried the promise, he didn't understand what the promise meant. It wasn't for him to own or possess. It was for him to honor, respect, and celebrate. It was for him to pass on, just as it is for us.

Someone wrote, "When we deserve a blasting, God substitutes a blessing." And these are the moments that we need to pass on to our loved ones. We can think of people whose stories have changed our lives. Telling of our own God encounters witnesses to God's presence in our lives, and can lead others to consider how God might be speaking and working in their lives, too.

For the rascal that Jacob is, he gives God glory by setting up an altar in that place where he dreamt of the staircase extending between heaven and earth. Though we can't contain God's presence in one place, worship is important. Setting up an altar is important. We are deeply affected by our God encounters, and the time and place is sacred.

Where was yours? Was it at a camp? Here in this very sanctuary? Near a beautiful lake? On a mountaintop? Was it when you or your child was baptized? When you were married? When you gave birth to a child or held a baby in your arms? Was it when you saw a relative or good friend after a long time?

As I watched the news about the events in Charlottesville - the hatred, violence, and blatant racism - I encountered God in the faces of fellow clergy who stood in silent protest against white supremacists. Encountering God means that we're pushed and convicted about who we are and who God is. It means that we rise up against evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever form. It means that we pray and we move beyond prayer to action. The boundary between heaven and earth was blurry again, and it was a good thing. We need God encounters that move us, transform us, and remind us of God's presence and God's call!

You might know that we just spent two weeks in Serbia and Montenegro. Serbia is largely Eastern Orthodox, and Orthodox churches are very elaborate and very much appealing to the senses, especially sight with lots of gold and many icons.

SHOW PIC: This first picture is the lower area of one church, and you can see brightness and all of the depictions of Jesus and the disciples on the ceiling.

SHOW PIC: The next is the dome of another church - a reminder of the connection between heaven and earth. At both churches, we lit candles remembering loved ones and praying for the living. And I felt like Jacob - recognizing and feeling God's presence in a special way.

Later today, we'll go to Lake Louise United Methodist Camp with other pastors and their families. In high school, I went to Lake Louise, and it was a formative time for me. Our evening fire bowl was a solemn time. We sang lots of songs, but one song that signaled the end of our time at the campfire. That song was "Jacob's Ladder." At the last verse, we'd all get up and join hands. It was a powerful moment of connection with one another and with God – the One who had brought us together.

I don't know if the tradition was meant to be this way, but as I thought about it, I figured that we sang "Jacob's Ladder" as our parting song at camp to remind us of the God encounter we were having in those days together.

For many of us, that setting allowed us to be as open as we'd ever been to God. And like Jacob, I experienced something new about God. I understood that God was faithful to all the promises of Scripture. I felt a new sense of communion with God. I had an assurance of God's presence with me in that place and in every place I would go.

Someone wrote, "The scoundrel Jacob will never become a saint, but he will become a character who has struggled with God." That may sound harsh at first, but think about it for a moment – isn't that all any of us can hope for? Maybe we can see ourselves in Jacob - someone who manipulates others for our own benefit and grabbing at all that we can get. But then we have the realization that what God has – grace, love, forgiveness, and mercy – can only be given and never taken for our own gain.

There's a phrase that sums up Jacob's relationship with God and ours: "Whom God loves, God never leaves."

Thanks be to God. AMEN.