

God will not leave us alone
Genesis 27 and 28

Treachery, conniving, betrayal, deception. They're all present in this story of Jacob. What a contrast from last week's reading of the creation account in the first chapter of Genesis where "God saw all that God had made and behold, it was very good." It didn't take long, in the biblical account of our human story, for human frailty to emerge, for goodness to become marred. Today's reading from the Narrative Lectionary that we are following, skips over several generations to get to the story of Jacob, so a brief review is in order. We will recall that family discord emerged within the very first family of record. The sons of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel grew up with different interests: Cain was a farmer who tilled the earth while Abel was a herder. When jealousy emerged over whose sacrifice to God was more acceptable, Cain killed his brother Abel.

Later, in the stories of Noah and the flood and the tower of Babel, we witness the human community first turning away from God and then trying to be God. In the aftermath of a destructive flood and then a dispersion of people from a central location, God called Abraham and promised to bless all people through his descendants. But the roll-out of that blessing appeared to be as botched as the lithium batteries in Samsung's Galaxy Note 7 phones. Abraham was getting old and his wife had not yet born a child. Where were these descendants that God promised? So Sarah and Abraham began the cycle of conniving and betrayal. They nearly caused the death of their servant Hagar and her son Ishmael, fathered by Abraham. But God remained faithful to them and blessed their son Isaac and his wife Rebecca with a set of twins: Esau and Jacob.

Like their ancestors Abel and Cain, Esau and Jacob were opposites: Esau, the first to leave the womb, was covered with hair and he became a skilled hunter and a favorite of his father. Jacob, the tender one, remained close to mother's apron strings and learned to cook. Rebecca wished for her second-born the patriarchal blessing that was intended for the first-born. She hatched a plot and orchestrated a deception that resulted in her husband Isaac's blessing of Jacob, rather than Esau. On a previous occasion, Jacob had carried out his own treachery by bribing Esau to give him his birthright. So now, the deal was complete: Jacob had entirely usurped the position of his brother. Not surprisingly Esau was furious and wished to kill Jacob. Rebecca intervened again, this time to save her son Jacob by sending him off to the land and home of her brother, Jacob's uncle Laban.

There is nothing in the story to this point that indicates that Jacob revered the God whom his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac followed and worshipped. We would hardly expect that his journey to safety will include a vision quest. Is Jacob seeking a vision? It doesn't seem like it. It seems like he's just trying to save his skin! But his escape takes him into the wilderness, into a place of vulnerability. He is alone, under the stars, with only a stone for a pillow.

Was it hard for Jacob to go to sleep that night? Did he hear jackals in the distance or other wild animals that might harm him? Did he feel any remorse for deceiving his father and betraying his brother? Did he fear that his brother might even pursue him or send someone to kill him? Did he feel completely desolate, separated from the constant care of his mother?

What would come next if we were writing this story? This guy is guilty and in need of some serious consequences, don't you think? Shouldn't he have to go back home and make amends? Shouldn't that which he stole be returned?

But it's not our story to write. This is God's story. God the Creator who makes all things good. God came to Jacob in a dream, as his head rested on a stone. In that dream, he saw a ladder that extended between earth and heaven. Angels moved up and down the ladder, connecting heaven and earth. And Jacob heard a voice of blessing, an echo of the blessing that his Grandfather Abraham received: "your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth...and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring" (Gen 28:14).

Jacob woke with a sense of awe and wonder. He accepted the dream as reality and made a profession of faith: "Surely God is in this place...This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." And the story continues with a few additional verses that we did not read this morning:

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. He called that place Bethel [house of God];

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go,

and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you." (Gen 28:18-22)

This, of course, is not the end of the story of Jacob, but it is as far as we will travel today. This portion of the story alone gives us plenty to consider. In the last few days I've been reading Madeleine L'Engle's 1986 book *A Stone for a Pillow*,¹ in which she related Jacob's story to our story, especially the life of Christians in the United States, in the late 20th century. I'd like to share a few of her observations, which also relate to our theme for the coming year: "Growing together as children of God."

1) The first point that L'Engle made is that God doesn't love us because we are good. God loves us because God is love and created all things good. She wrote: "All through the great stories [of scripture], heavenly love is lavished on visibly imperfect people. Scripture asks us to look at Jacob as he really is, to look at ourselves as we really are, and then realize that this is who God loves. God did not love Jacob because he was a cheat, but because he was Jacob." In the same way, "God loves us in our complex *isness*.... (46)

2) God doesn't wait for us to "get it together" and doesn't require a perfect setting in which to speak to us. L'Engle wrote: "Jacob's vision of glory came in the midst of his terror. We do not have to be at peace, or have perfect conditions, in order to glimpse glory." [129] While it's valuable to take time to commune with God in settings like the one where we will spend our retreat time next weekend, God's action in our lives is not limited to idyllic settings or dependent on our careful arrangements. God comes to us in the midst of grief, family crisis, unexpected illness, and natural disaster. According to L'Engle:

God does not promise us protection any more than he promised it to Jesus. Or Jacob. We are not given protection. We are given vulnerability.

We are promised not the absence of pain, but the blessed warning of pain.

We are promised not that we won't be wounded, that we won't bleed, but that we will be transfused.

We are promised not that we won't die, but that we shall live. (238-239)

3) Receiving God's blessing is a call to bless others, even the enemy. L'Engle suggested that we begin by practicing this blessing toward enemies that we "easily identif[y]: disease, terrorists, [abusers], powermongers. Then keep coming in closer. Hold out to the love of God those who have hurt us. Those who have let us down" (225). "Then," she continued, "it's time to move in even closer. To call on God to bless and transform the enemy within ourselves. [...] Only if I am able to bless the parts of myself which are furthest from God's image," will these objectionable parts be redeemed. And to do all this blessing, of the enemies without and within, L'Engle concurred with our theme, "growing together." She wrote that we are "often too hurt or too angry to have the least desire to bless." But we can do this "in a context of love, [...] the love of other people, ... who allow [us] to be complex and contradictory" (226-227).

4) Finally, Jacob's story, Jacob's dream, invites us to grow up even as we remain as children. L'Engle related that an 11-year-old girl wrote and asked: "How can I remain a child forever and not grow up?" To this, L'Engle replied: "I don't think you can, and I don't think it would be a good idea if you could. What you *can* do, and what I hope you *will* do, is remain a child forever, and grow up, too.' This is what it means to be a whole human being, rather than an isolated fragment of our own chronology" (132). She continued:

We become whole by being all of ourselves, including the aspects we like least as well as those of which we are able to approve. When we try to approve of ourselves (rather than to love ourselves) we tend to lose both our senses of humour and of wonder. [...] Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were 'grown-ups' in the proper sense. They accepted themselves as they were, and they remained sensitive to the wonder of God. And they were willing to change, to move into new ways. (134)

May we accept that God loves us because God made us good. May we remember that God is with us always and will not leave us alone. May we practice blessing others (and ourselves) in the way we have received blessing. And may we remain children forever *and* grow up.

¹ Madeleine L'Engle, *A Stone for a Pillow: Journeys with Jacob*. Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986.