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Genesis 28:10–19

## OH JACOB

Have you ever noticed, when you start reading in Genesis, how the story overlaps and eventually intertwines? You name one patriarch and find a place, an altar, and as you continue to read, you will uncover every other patriarch and rediscover every altar. And maybe that's why we have such a hard time keeping the names and the stories straight.

Think about it. We have studied these Genesis' stories literally for decades. And yet, a reality check reveals how little we understand them. Can you name the three different times that three different patriarchs lied to foreign dignitaries about their wives? You have heard it over and over. You might get one or two, but three—come on! And all those future leaders, like Jacob, but others as well, who have assassination promises made on their lives, threats to their very existence, plots of annihilation which God promises, and they are always seemingly at risk. It is, after all, exceedingly difficult to father a great nation if you are dead before you have children, right? And these stories are full of those life and death experiences. Oh, yes, there are stories of romance and camels; there are rendezvous at wells and stony fields. There are barren women and women becoming mothers and there are deals made with fathers for their virgins and even deals made between sisters. Everyone seems to be getting in on the subterfuge—that story beneath. Younger brothers routinely usurp authority from older brothers. And the epiphanies and theophanies abound. And here we are again in one of those stories: The grasper running for his life, but not only an angry brother, but an angry father this time. Jacob, yes. He and his mother have bamboozled his father and his brother for the last time.

It's hard, isn't it, to avoid the distractions of all the ins and outs of these stories? Just think about it. Jacob's father, Isaac, is the child that Abraham nearly sacrificed. Isaac and his beloved go childless for most of their life. And then when they are finally blessed with children, their two boys seem to cause them endless grief. Isaac, who grows old and suffers physical blindness, also has the curse of being spiritually blind. This gives way to a hapless brother Esau—a brother bent on revenge and restitution. As I say, it is easy to be distracted.

Meanwhile, today we catch up with Jacob. He is experiencing insomnia, induced by anxiety. You know what it feels like. Our misgivings seem to replay their loudest exactly when we are trying to rest. Jacob is attempting sleep only to receive a renewal of the covenant promise – and all this before he heads off – the trickster heads off to be duped by Laban. And in *Wishful Thinking*, author Frederick Buechner calls this Jacob a died-in-the-wool thief, a double-barreled con artist. And he is off now after this epiphany—

this experience of being in God's presence—to be hoodooed by his future wives, and his future father-in-law. And, all on his wedding night.

So centuries later, it is important for us to understand what is happening, especially here at Bethel. It is important to know that whenever we come to some place that is new, God is already there waiting for us. Notice the order of events. In verse 12, the angels ascend before they ever descend. God's emissaries are already waiting. At Luz, that will become Bethel, they are already there waiting for Jacob to show up. Now it doesn't matter if you are eight-years-old or eighty-years-old, it is essential to know that God is already preparing your future. Jay Wallace compared the lyrics of *Stairway to Heaven*, a Led Zeppelin song, to God's version of life: *Know that I am with you, and I will keep you wherever you go. I will bring you back. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised*—God's promises, God's help, even for us to respond to the promise; and all the while we get caught up with that pot full of gold, pursuing riches, chasing the rainbow. And all the while, it is God's presence that satisfies that longing in Jacob. God knows what we long for. God understands in us that emptiness—that void that comes from trying to earn our acceptance. I think sometimes that when we Presbyterians preach grace, what we hear in the pew is that it doesn't matter what you do, God is going to love you. Wouldn't it be great if we could hear: because of God's love, what we do matters all the more? Who we are is shaped by the one who has been waiting for us.

The story we shared today makes it abundantly clear that God's acceptance is not reserved for those who deserve it or even for those who are lovable. God has chosen to grant us a glorious reception even if, or in spite of the fact that, we are unacceptable, undeserving, miserable seekers, in every generation. Paul Tillich said it this way: "The gospel of grace is a declaration to finally, *finally*, accept that we are accepted." For me that's good news. For me, it is indeed the Gospel in the Flesh, accepting or surrendering to God's monumental acceptance. That is more important than anything else I will ever say to you or anything else you will ever distill or understand from scripture. It means that we don't have to wait for God to catch up. It means we can go forward and know that we are not alone. It means that God doesn't need for us to be perfect.

Oh Jacob, Jacob, when will you learn that God is already here? You stopped because the sun went down. And God was waiting. And even before you lay down your head, he accepted you. Will you acknowledge that acceptance today? And if you do acknowledge it, what terms will you place on accepting God's acceptance? There are no terms. It is absolute and it is free.

Oh Jacob, Jacob, Jacob, when will we learn? Amen.