

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** Genesis 28:10-19a

*<sup>10</sup> Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. <sup>11</sup> When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. <sup>12</sup> He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. <sup>13</sup> There above it stood the Lord, and he said: “I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. <sup>14</sup> Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. <sup>15</sup> I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” <sup>16</sup> When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” <sup>17</sup> He was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.” <sup>18</sup> Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. <sup>19</sup> He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz.*

UCLA football coach, Pepper Rodgers was in the middle of a terrible season. It even got so bad that it upset his home life. He recalls, My dog was my only friend. I told my wife that a man needs at least two friends, and she bought me another dog.”

The part of the story, read to us today, of Jacob’s life is a great story of God’s love and grace. To understand and appreciate the greatness of this story, we should take a few moments to review Jacob’s life prior to this encounter with God. Jacob was the son of Isaac and Rebekah. He was a twin to his brother Esau. The babies jostled with each other while in the womb. Rebekah asked God why this was happening was happening to her and God answered saying: “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.” One gets the feeling that this is a hint that the two boys were going to have a difficult or competitive relationship.

When they were born, Esau arrived first. The bible tells us he was red and his whole body was like a hairy garment. Jacob, hanging on to his brother’s heel arrived soon after. Esau was a great hunter and since his father Isaac had a taste for wild meat, Esau became his favorite and Jacob became Rebekah’s favorite.

One day Jacob was making some stew. Esau came in from a hunting trip feeling famished. The smell of the stew must have been tantalizing to his senses and he demanded that Jacob give him some of the stew immediately. Here is where we learn that Jacob had a deceitful part in his spirit. He insisted that Esau swear an oath to him that he would hand over his birthright—which was rightfully due to Esau because he was the oldest son—in exchange for a bowl of stew. Esau was so hungry he agreed to this arrangement.

As Isaac grew old, blind, and nearing death, he wanted to pass on his blessing to Esau. Isaac sent Esau on a hunt for some wild game to prepare a delicious meal for him, and then he would pass on his blessing to Esau. So, Esau went on a hunt.

Rebekah heard this exchange and called her favorite son, Jacob, to her and together they put together a plan to deceive Isaac so that he would pass on the blessing to Jacob instead of

Esau. She made some tasty for him, she dressed him in some of Esau's finest clothes and, on his hands and the smooth back of his neck she put goat skins to make him feel hairy like Esau.

This deceptive plan worked. Isaac passed on Esau's blessing to Jacob, which could not be rescinded after he and Esau realized Isaac had been deceived by Jacob. The only blessing Isaac could pass onto Esau was that he would serve his brother. Esau, as you can imagine was furious and he held a grudge, saying that after his father died and the time of grieving had passed, he would kill Jacob. Upon learning about this, Rebekah sent Jacob away, saying that when Esau calmed down, she would call for Jacob to come back. That brings us to the scripture we read today.

Jacob was essentially scoundrel who cheated the birthright and blessing out of his brother Esau. He ran away to save his life from his brother's anger. Jacob was all alone, vulnerable with an unknown future. He stopped at a certain place for the night. There was no shelter, no place to lie his head, except on a stone and he fell asleep.

What intrigues me most about this story is that God met Jacob right where he was, through a dream, as a person with a less than honorable past and as a man lacking in Godly spirituality. God did not wait for Jacob to call out his name and repent. He didn't wait for Jacob to climb out of whatever slime pit his spirit was sinking in. He went to Jacob and met him right where he was in his spiritual—or lack of spiritual—journey.

This is not the only story in the bible that we find God doing this. Moses was a murderer and God came to him through a burning bush that really did not burn. And even when Moses said to God that he would not be able to do what God wanted him to do, God stuck with him, encouraged him and lead the way for Moses to do great things for God's people.

Saul, later known as the apostle Paul was another one who lacked a less than stellar past. He pursued the believers in Christ, dragged them in chains back to Jerusalem where they were persecuted. Likely, he thought he was ridding the world of an evil cult causing dissention to the Jewish laws.

Suddenly there was a light that flashed from heaven and blinded him. The risen Lord stopped Paul dead in his tracks, and asked Paul why he was doing what he was doing. Paul remained blind for three days. When his sight was restored, he got baptized and immediately began spreading the Gospel to the Gentiles. Once again, God did not wait for Saul to come to his senses and repent of his evil ways. God met him just as he was and changed him forever.

As was the case with these others, Jacob came to know God firsthand because God came to him in his current broken and lost state. This was a game changer for Jacob because he had been hearing about God all his life from his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac but never felt that God was real. Now Jacob knew God is real. Now Jacob was able to identify with God, not just as his grandfather's God, or his father's God. He knew God now also as the God of Jacob.

He also learned through God's meeting him in his sinful state, that God was for him. God had not written him off as a lost cause. This gracious God does not judge or rebuke him, but meets Jacob where he is and gives him the promise of a future in spite of who he was and what he had done.

God made promises to his grandfather Abraham—promises he now planned to keep through this unlikely scoundrel—Jacob—the promises he would have many descendants like the dust of the earth, with land to live on, and a plan to bless every family of the earth. These would be God's chosen people. Jacob now had a new purpose for life, and it came from God—not greed, cheating and other evil means. For this crook fleeing for his life who was so alone, he now

had the assurance that God would be with him, protect him, and bring him back to God's side and fulfill everything God promised, turns Jacob into a new man, spiritually guided by God.

Jacob was so moved by this encounter with God that he used the stone that had been his pillow for the night to memorialize the place where his life was changed by God. This tells me that he didn't want to forget what happened and he did not want to go back to his evil ways. This tells me he gave God his life and promised to worship, love and obey God.

How marvelous is the grace of God! How amazing it is that God pursues us even when we stray and get lost in the mire and muck of the sin of this world. How wonderful it is that God meets us right where we are, restoring us or perhaps leading us for the first time to His side.

An old Native American, after living many years in sin, was led to Christ by a missionary. Friends asked him to explain the change in his life. Reaching down, he picked-up a little worm and placed it on a pile of leaves. Then touching a lit match to the leaves, he watched them smolder and burst into flames. As the flames worked their way to the center where the worm lay, the old chief suddenly plunged his hand into the center of the burning pile and snatched out the worm. Holding the worm and gently in his hand, he gave this testimony to the grace of God: "Me, that worm!"

The story of Jacob is not a story we can write-off as being nonapplicable to our lives because we have never anything remotely close to the kinds of things Jacob did. We should not ignore this lesson because we faithfully go to church and give our offerings.

The lessons in this story are relevant to us as we recognize that we too are capable of and do indeed sin and reject God's call to our lives. Even church attenders well acquainted with God's Word, sometimes question and ignore God's tug on their hearts to fulfill God's will to help bring new life to the church.

It is possible for believers to rob the stranger of an opportunity to meet Jesus because he/she looked down on the stranger for whatever reason. Having an unwillingness to meet people—both the stranger or a fallen brother or sister in Christ, right where they are in their broken and lostness—separates us from God.

Like God, it is important for us to meet people right where they are. We are called to this mission, to restore, or to introduce people to the love and grace of God, to help them find their purpose and meaning for life in God's plan. Oh yes, this message is important for us, not just because we need God's marvelous grace, but also because we are called to be agents of God's grace and God's love for the lost and afraid, for the sinner and the fugitive, for everyone in need of God.

The stories of reaching out with acceptance and grace do not always end as happily as Jacob's story, but the seed gets planted, and God never stops watering it. God never stops pursuing the heart that needs loved, forgiven and guided by Him. Thank goodness. May we never give up on the lost, just as God never gives up on us when we wander from him. Amen.