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Genesis 28:1-19a

“God Shows Up in Unexpected Places”

This summer the lectionary (our 3 year cycle of assigned Bible stories) winds its way through Genesis . . . and I am here for it. I love these stories! They’re full of drama and intrigue, scoundrels and liars, and very human and very flawed people – but despite it all, God keeps showing up for these folks. For anyone who thinks the “Old Testament” God is vengeful or full of wrath, I advise reading Genesis. Because God is more than patient with these flawed characters, and loves them despite all their numerous failures.

Today we meet Jacob, and you can’t get a bigger liar or cheat than Jacob, but God shows up for him in the deserted place of Haran and promises him the sun, moon, and stars and everything in between. Frederick Buechner observes, “The book of Genesis makes no attempt to conceal the fact that Jacob was a ‘crook.’” Buechner muses over the fact that God gives him a blessing instead of the chewing out Jacob deserves, (*Peculiar Treasures*, p. 56). Jacob’s name literally means “he takes by the heel”, and Jacob truly is a heel: a grabby, despicable, and unscrupulous cheat. And he has been since birth, when in utero he grabbed his twin brother’s heel, in his first instance of jockeying to be number 1.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. A little background:

In June we covered the Abraham and Sarah cycle; in between their story and today, their son Isaac marries Rebecca and they have twin sons Jacob and Esau. These twins couldn’t have been more different. A book reviewer once noted that, “One of the oldest and best stories in human history is a simple narrative of betrayal and revenge, and it gets even better when it happens in a family.” And we have all of that in Jacob and Esau’s story.

Their rivalry spans 8 chapters in the Bible. Esau is technically the older brother since he was born first. Esau is by far the more attractive of the boys, an outdoorsman, a hunter, and his father Isaac’s favorite.

Jacob, the story says, is a quiet man who stays home in the tent, and was his mother’s favorite. He is also very smart. And he and his mother turn out to be among the best schemers and manipulators in history.

These twin brothers couldn't have been more different.

You might recall that one day, Esau came in from working the fields. He was famished, and smelled a delicious stew. "What do I have to do to get a bowl of that stew?" he asks Jacob. And Jacob replies, "Give me your birthright—your right of inheritance and our father's blessing." For some reason Esau agrees. I guess when you're that hungry, you'll sell your soul. In any event, Esau lets his stomach think for him and now has given away his precious right to inherit the property after Isaac dies.

But the next deception is far worse. Isaac is near the end of his life; he's old, he doesn't get around much, and is nearly blind. It's time for him to give the blessing that will confer inheritance rights on Esau, the eldest son. But Isaac can't have that! so he plans a little celebration and tells Esau to go hunting and he'll stay behind to make him his favorite stew and they will sit down and eat and drink together and the blessing will be conveyed.

Rebekah (remember, she favors Jacob) and Jacob thereupon pull off one of the most appalling scams imaginable. While Esau is hunting, she prepares the stew and concocts an elaborate disguise for Jacob so that he will appear to be Esau—remember, Isaac is not seeing so well any longer—she even arranges for Jacob to feel and smell like Esau. Isaac is uneasy when Jacob, disguised as Esau, comes in with the food. But it works. Jacob receives the blessing that was intended for Esau.

In the meantime Esau returns, eats the stew, comes to his father, and learns that the blessing has already been given. It is irrevocable. It cannot be undone. Now, Esau may have been willing to shrug off the birthright; but the blessing, not so much. After Jacob stole his blessing, Esau threatened to kill him. "The day our father dies I am going to kill my brother." It is a threat to be taken very seriously.

After this, Rebecca intercedes, arranges a getaway for Jacob, and Jacob leaves, literally fleeing for his life. That's the situation, and you really need to know all that to understand the rest.

When we meet Jacob today, he's on the run, banished from his home and family as a result of his own deception and deceit. There's no greater humiliation, and it's basically a death sentence. It's hard to live in the wilderness alone, and he has to keep one eye peeled for his brother who is out to get him!

What is God thinking coming to Jacob's rescue? Shouldn't he get what he deserves? What's the old saying? You made your bed, now lie in it! Or . . . you reap what you sow? Or face the music? Or what goes around, come around?

I know the title of this sermon is God shows up in unexpected places, but before we get to that let's take a moment to consider that God shows up for unexpected people, too.

Frederick Buechner says Genesis makes no attempt to hide the fact that Jacob is a crook. And he's exactly right.

Lord knows, God doesn't choose Jacob because Jacob is good.

Instead, God chooses Jacob because God is gracious.

That's one of the hardest lessons in Scripture. We want fairness. We want people to get what they deserve.

But if we're honest, none of us really wants what we deserve.

We want mercy.

And that's exactly what Jacob receives.

But that's only half the surprise.

The other surprise isn't **who** God blesses.

It's **where** God blesses him.

Think about the setting.

Jacob isn't worshiping, or praying, or even making amends and confesing his sin.

He isn't in church.

He's sleeping outside with a rock for a pillow. He's on the run! A fugitive of his own making!

If there were ever a place that looked empty of God's presence, this would be it.

And yet it is there that heaven opens. A ladder appears, and the angels of God are ascending and descending on it.

It is there that God says,

"Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go,
and will bring you back to this land;

for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." And what does God promise?

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.

In this very unexpected place, Jacob received the blessing he'd been chasing. Who would have thunk it?

A year ago, I found myself in an unexpected place.

I certainly didn't expect to spend part of my summer in a hospital or rehab after a stroke. I didn't expect waiting rooms, therapy appointments, CT scans, and MRIs to become part of my routine.

If you'd asked me where I expected to encounter God, I probably would have pointed to this sanctuary. Or in Yosemite with my family, like we had planned.

But God showed up in the place where I was, which was exactly the place I needed God to show up.

God showed up in gifted doctors and compassionate nurses and excellent therapists.

God showed up in Terry's steady presence.

God showed up in your prayers, your cards, your meals, and your encouragement.

God showed up in quiet moments when I couldn't see very far ahead.

Because God's promise is true:

"I am with you."

And I know many of you have your own Bethel.

Maybe yours is a hospital room, or a nursing home.

Maybe it's hospice, or the grief that still catches you by surprise.

Maybe it's loneliness.

Maybe it's the uncertainty of not knowing what comes next.

We all have places we never expected to find ourselves.

Jacob wakes up and says,

"Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it."

Notice he doesn't say, "God came here."

He says, "God was already here."

Friends, that is the good news of this story.

God comes to us not just when we are sitting in our pew in church or saying our prayers. God comes to us in our humanness: where we are most human, which means in our frailties and weaknesses, in our doubts, in anxieties and fears, in our hopes and our dreams. God comes to

us in our disappointments, and in our failure to be as good and strong and honest as we want to be. God comes to us in our guilt, and in our betrayals and deceits, just like God came to Jacob.

Jacob's humanity is there for all to see. Walter Brueggemann observes that Jacob's wakeful world was a world of terror, loneliness, and guilt.

What Jacob did was despicable. But even his guilt did not separate him from God or keep God from finding him with the promise of newness and possibility. "I will be with you and keep you and bring you home."

Is there any better news than that? There is nothing we have done or can do that will keep God from coming to us with the promise of forgiveness, restoration, and homecoming. It is, Brueggemann says, the gospel, "the full complement of Good News." God is with us. God will keep us. God will bring us home.

God doesn't wait until life is put back together.

God meets us in the wilderness.

God meets us in the waiting room.

God meets us in grief.

God meets us in fear.

God meets us on the journey.

And there, in the places we least expect, God whispers the same promise given to Jacob:

"I am with you."

Amen.

Sources:

Feasting on the Word, Year A, commentary for Genesis 28

John Buchanan, "Pursued, Found and Kept", July 17, 2005