

“Stories of Jacob – Working with What You Get”

God would have us live. Third question: How does God relate to us?? God works with what God gets! Even if what God gets is someone like the conniving, manipulative Jacob, who is willing to steal from his brother and from God!

I find this profoundly hopeful. We were created in the image of God, not that humanity ever did a good job of living it out. Yet! God commits to **us**—no matter who God has to work with—in God’s desire and hope to help us live out that image. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures we see that God kept that promise. That covenant promise that the descendants of Abraham would be a blessing to the world took another plot twist in Jesus, in a way that has been a blessing to us. And here we are, 2,000 years later, Gentiles (!) who seek to love God with all our heart, soul and mind, who desire to love our neighbour as ourselves. This is so profoundly hopeful, because this commitment to the whole world is also God’s commitment to you, and me. And if God was willing to keep that commitment and work with the likes of Jacob, then we can be relieved and grateful that God will work with what God gets in us!

I also find it profoundly hopeful for the church. In many corners of the church in North America there is a growing dispondency. Over 60 years the game changed dramatically in our society. The Christian faith is not as prevalent or as influential as it once was.... and the church in response too easily circles the wagons to try to keep on keeping on. We too easily forget the answers to those three questions. From God’s point of view, it has always been hard to influence humanity to do two essential things: to know and love God, and to love neighbour. It was hard with Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, with Jacob! But this is the *missio Dei*—the mission of God—to help humanity live these two ways, and God is still committed to that! That is covenant. And we, the followers of Jesus, have been added to the descendants of Abraham, with God working through us to be a blessing to the world. That’s what we are here for. But we too easily question our ability to be this blessing because we think we are diminished. We need only remember: 1] we are God’s partners in helping people to know and love God, and to love each other. 2] And God will help us be partners in this mission. That’s God’s commitment to us. 3] And God will work with us, because God always works with those God gets. That gives me hope.

We will see how true that was with Jacob over the next four weeks. Stay tuned!

Date: 6 August 2017

Text: Genesis 25: 21 - 34

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What is the nature of God? How does God relate to us? How would God have us live? If you believe God exists then these are crucial questions. Indeed, you already have your answers and those answers shape your faith. We are going to explore these questions over five weeks as we reflect on the stories of Jacob. This morning we are going to start with an unusual sermon that will take us for a sprint through the first half of Genesis to answer these three questions so we are prepared for the incredible plot twist that Jacob presents in this story of God.

The opening stories of Genesis aren’t history, but ancient Jewish faith stories to answer fundamental questions, like “where did we come from?” But they also answer those crucial ones: What is the nature of God? How does God relate to us? How would God have us live? So, in the beginning: God set Adam and Eve up in the Garden of Eden. “Do whatever you wish. Just don’t eat the fruit of that tree over there—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”. Stay innocent. In other words: have 99.9% freedom. Well they ate. Jesus would one day teach that the first thing God hopes we can do is “to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind”. Adam and Eve didn’t. In response God performed God’s first act of tough love, ushering them out of the Garden. God hoped they would get the message and do a better job of honouring God. But things went awry again pretty quickly. One of their children, Cain, killed his brother Abel. Jesus would also teach that the second thing God hopes we can do is “love our neighbour as yourself”. These two encouragements—to love God and neighbour—have been God’s desire for how we should live since the beginning. Yet only four chapters in we see that helping us do this was not going to be easy.

Things only got worse, so God decided to start again. God decided to upgrade humanity to version 2.0. God hoped that a fresh start after the flood would lead to better things. But starting fresh didn’t resolve things either. Soon people were building the Tower of Babel, to make a reputation for themselves, having pretensions to be like gods themselves. So the verdict was now in: Humanity version 2.0 had the same bugs as version 1.0. Floods were not the answer, so God committed never to do that again. If people were going to honour God and love each other, then God would need a very different strategy. At its core, what was it? To engage with humanity—just as they are—adjusting to each generation as it arises, all the while maintaining God’s own hopes for us, the creatures. God decided to work with what God got, generation after generation,

in order to help them fulfill God's will. So, as for that crucial question: How does God relate to us? God adjusts.

So, what was the next strategy? It was to find one single exceptionally faithful person – just one – and from his offspring raise up one nation who will show the world, by their own example, how God would have everyone live. This one nation would provide the answers to the three questions. God found Abraham. God tested Abraham's faithfulness. God directed Abraham to move, and he moved. To wait patiently for a child—even in their old age—and they did. Then God gave Abraham the ultimate test: would you sacrifice your son Isaac out of faithfulness to me? Abraham's answer was "yes". God pushed Abraham as far as possible, so God could be absolutely sure God had the right person to start the next venture in teaching the world how God would have us live. Abraham passed the ultimate test of faithfulness. And we hear God's voice to Abraham, "I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore... and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves" (Genesis 22). A good start, and God's hope for humanity continued. But now, in addition, we see God committing to a plan, and committing to a people. God made a promise. We call that a covenant. In the covenant God was saying "I will be faithful to you....even if you are not always faithful to me."

Genesis marches on, breezing quickly through the life of Isaac (Abraham's son). Next: Jacob. And here we get the big plot twist. Today's passage is filled with foreshadowing of things to come. The twins Jacob and Esau tussle with each other in Rebekah's womb – so much so that it prompted Rebekah to take her concerns to God. Then we hear this pronouncement to Rebekah from God: "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, and *the elder shall serve the younger*". For the parents, Isaac and Rebekah, this would be the most scandalous news imaginable. The idea that the younger brother would be the superior brother! The one who received the benefits. The one who would lead the family in the next generation. This was not how things happened. This was wrong. And in this moment we hear God simply declare this is going to be how it works out. It is an inscrutable announcement, for God does not explain nor does God justify, despite how scandalous the idea was to Isaac and Rebekah. They would have been left wondering: why this would be so? But let's not forget what we've seen from the stories of the first half of Genesis: [1] in fulfilling God's will God adjusts to each generation as it arises, and [2] God continues committed to influence the world using the descendants of Abraham as God seeks to fulfill his will. God is going to work with what God gets. And that means working with Jacob.

The first hint of Jacob's nature comes in the birth story. Jacob wasn't being left behind by his brother: he came out of the womb holding firm to Esau's foot. Jacob's nature becomes even more evident in the story of the lentil stew. Esau was so hungry and tired that he wasn't thinking clearly about the bargain he was about to make...so he traded away his inheritance (land, possessions, honour, respect, wealth) for a bowl of food. And what do we see in Jacob? A conniving, manipulative, self-centered person.

Then the story goes from bad to worse. Blind old Isaac was ready to give his blessing to his eldest son Esau. But while Esau is out hunting for game to make his father's favourite meal, Jacob dressed like his brother, took in a meal his mother quickly prepared, fooled his father and got the blessing intended for Esau. In those days people believed that a father uttering the words of blessing actually changed the fortunes for the future of the one receiving the blessing. Hear Isaac's blessing of his son Jacob: "May God give you the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you and nations bow down to you". Jacob was not only a manipulator, but now also a thief. He was not expressing love to neighbour (which here was his own family). Nor was he honouring God. God's blessing would normally be intended for Esau. You can read this story as Jacob, in this clandestine act, over-ruling God!

Jacob was no Abraham! He could hardly be more different than his grandfather. But God promised Abraham: "I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore... and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves." God's strategy for shaping humanity seemed to get off with a great start with Abraham, but God was now saddled with Jacob...to work with this self-centered, manipulative thief...and to use Jacob to fulfill God's covenant. But God stayed committed to work with what God got. And over the next four Sundays we will see how God did just that.

So, back to our three questions. How would God have us live? Through the son of God we hear it boiled down to two essential things: to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbour as ourselves. And what do we learn in the first half of Genesis? We see that from the get go, story after story, that the human creature is just not naturally programmed this way. How God deals with this reality is seen in the answer to Question 2: What is the nature of God? At its core is a commitment God keeps with us. A covenant. That God will always work with us, encouraging us to live out these two qualities. Put another way, God lives in hope for us, that humanity can and will live as