

Genesis 28:10-19 (The Message)

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went to Haran. He came to a certain place and camped for the night since the sun had set. He took one of the stones there, set it under his head and lay down to sleep. And he dreamed: A stairway was set on the ground and it reached all the way to the sky; angels of God were going up and going down on it.

Then GOD was right before him, saying, "I am GOD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. I'm giving the ground on which you are sleeping to you and to your descendants. Your descendants will be as the dust of the Earth; they'll stretch from west to east and from north to south. All the families of the Earth will bless themselves in you and your descendants. Yes. I'll stay with you, I'll protect you wherever you go, and I'll bring you back to this very ground. I'll stick with you until I've done everything I promised you."

Jacob woke up from his sleep. He said, "GOD is in this place—truly. And I didn't even know it!" He was terrified. He whispered in awe, "Incredible. Wonderful. Holy. This is God's House. This is the Gate of Heaven."

Jacob was up first thing in the morning. He took the stone he had used for his pillow and stood it up as a memorial pillar and poured oil over it. He christened the place Bethel (God's House). The name of the town had been Luz until then.

Psalm 139:1-12 (NRSV)

¹O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

²You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

³You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.

⁵You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"

¹²even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

Jacob lays down his head and is ushered into the presence of God, at the place where the heavens are joined to the earth.

Will the experience change this crafty and devious man?

Running away

I doubt that John Newton had Jacob in mind when he wrote "Amazing Grace." Some of us may even think that grace is largely limited to the New Testament. But this story is all about God's grace, the fact that God would be present with Jacob, this deceitful and unworthy man. But that is what makes grace amazing, puzzling, perhaps even infuriating at times.

After trying to have children for nearly twenty years, God had finally answered Isaac's and Rebekah's prayers. She became pregnant with twins. It was a trying pregnancy that forebode great difficulties for the family. Esau was the older of the twins and Jacob the younger. Esau was the "field and stream" type, while Jacob was more "hearth and home." Esau was his father's favorite. Jacob was the apple of Rebekah's eye. The rivalry between the brothers that had begun in the womb only escalated as they grew older. Once, Esau had exchanged his birthright as the oldest son for a bowl of stew that Jacob had prepared. Esau had even sworn an oath on it, and such an oath could never be undone. From there, things only got worse.

When the elderly Isaac prepared to give his blessing to Esau, Rebekah and Jacob connived to trick the old man and steal the blessing for Jacob. Not surprisingly, Esau was terribly

angry at this thievery perpetrated on him by his own mother and brother. Rebekah decided that Jacob must leave and head northward to escape Esau's wrath. So, ostensibly in search of a wife, Jacob fled.¹

When Jacob is about sixty miles from home, he stops for the night and has the most remarkable dream.² First, Jacob sees a stairway (this is "Jacob's ladder") filled with angels making their way to and from the heavens. Second, Jacob realizes that God is standing next to him! There is nothing about Jacob's life or character that would make him worthy, at least in our eyes, of such a visit, but perhaps that is the point.

Up to this point, the only time Jacob has even uttered God's name was when he used it in a lie as he tricked his father. Yet, God has come to Jacob. And God extends to Jacob the remarkable promises that God had made to Abraham and to his son, Isaac. Now, the covenant will pass to the treacherous Jacob. The land will be Jacob's. His offspring will be countless. All the families on the earth will be blessed in Jacob and his family. What promises! So over the top. The covenant must pass from Isaac to a son – but to Jacob!? We are reminded yet again that with God it is never about our worthiness, but always about his grace and grace alone.

The response of the exiled

When Jacob awakens, what is his response to this remarkable encounter with God? First, he is awestruck. Who wouldn't be! I imagine that he fell on his knees, emotionally and spiritually overwhelmed by what had happened. But he didn't stop with what he had experienced and felt and heard. Jacob worshiped God. Jacob took the stone which he had used as a pillow while he slept and anointed it, setting it apart for God. In other words, Jacob consecrated the stone. He then made promises of his own, including a vow to give back to God one-tenth of all that God would give him – which would, of course, be one-tenth of everything that Jacob would ever have, as all things are a gift from God.

Perhaps Jacob isn't such a poor choice after all. He may be conniving and deceitful, but his first response to the presence of God is to worship. Would that be our response or would our minds turn to wondering what God is getting ready to do for us. Do we really place the worship of the LORD God Almighty at the center of our lives?

The Theme of Exile

Our reading of Scripture becomes richer and deeper as we learn to recognize key themes that run through the Bible. One of the key themes is that of exile.

After eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve are exiled from the Garden of Eden. Jacob must flee and goes to another land. After Absalom murders Amnon, he must also flee. The Babylonians overrun Jerusalem six centuries before Jesus and send tens of thousands into exile in Babylon. Jesus tells a story about a prodigal son who exiles himself.

What will be the exiles' response? Will they return home? What sort of welcome will they find? Where is God in this? These questions are on our minds.

When you go through all the stories of exile, it becomes clear that God's purposes move forward even through the tragedy and dislocation of exile. God never leaves the exiles but always sets about to accomplish their rescue.

Yes, Jacob cherished God's words in his head and in his heart. But he went the next step.

He also cherished God's visit with his hands, taking the concrete step to set aside for God's use a portion of all that he would ever have.

Jacob understood that this was the only appropriate response to God's grace. God had not asked this of Jacob. Jacob was not being obedient, he was being loving and grateful. How can we be any less grateful?

It is easy for us to approach worship as a time for us to get spiritually fed or to pick up some helpful tips for the coming week or to get reinvigorated before heading back into the "real world." But this is all wrong.

Worship is not about us but about God.

Worship is to be centered upon our Lord, not upon ourselves. The blessing is that as we more intently focus our worship on God we find ourselves fed in ways we never imagined possible. We discover who we were meant to be, who God created us to be.

¹This amounts to exile for Jacob. He will spend twenty years away from home. There is no mention of Rebekah ever seeing her beloved son again. I doubt she ever thought through the consequences of her deception. Of course, while she was pregnant God had told her that "the elder shall serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23). Nonetheless, her treachery was wrong and was certainly not undertaken out of love for Isaac or Esau.

²In the OT dreams are often a special means of communication from God. The dreams are solely God's initiative as the person is sleeping. When the dreamer awakens, he or she knows that God has visited. These are always pivotal moments in Scripture, often overflowing with theological significance.

Seeing Jacob and Sons in the Larger Story of God's Rescue Plan Part 1 – From Creation to Abraham

The first chapters of Genesis are foundational to everything that comes after. Jacob and his sons are part of a rescue plan necessitated by the human choices against God. The first three chapters of Genesis are foundational to everything that follows. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

1. Genesis 1:1-2:3 tells the story of creation from God's perspective. The language is formal, stately – "God-like!" God creates everything and pronounces it good! In the biblical world-view, God's creation is not inherently evil; rather, it is inherently good. The Bible tells the story of God's renewal and restoration of his good creation.

In this first story, God creates humans and creates them uniquely, in God's own image. We could spend a long time discussing what this might mean, but it is profoundly important. Additionally, God gives humans responsibility for the management/stewardship/trusteeship of God's creation.

2. Genesis 2:4b begins the story of creation told from the perspective of the humans. The language becomes earthy and messy. The focus is on Adam and Eve, not so much on God. It is here that we are told the story of how the humans turned from God, failing to do the one thing that God asked of them – not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We ought to see a lot of ourselves in this story. How many of us could resist the temptation to do the one thing we're asked not to do? No sooner do Adam & Eve bite the "apple," then they look around for someone to blame! Why does Eve first eat from the forbidden fruit? Because the serpent tells her that she will be "like God." As the Apostle Paul put it when writing 25 years after Jesus' resurrection, "they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the creator" (Romans: 1:25).
3. In chapter 3, we focus in on the stark depiction of Adam & Eve's rebellion – their sin. They've thrown themselves and all creation out of whack. This is a cosmic dislocation and the biblical writers often use striking images to describe it. Humans will now die, childbirth will be difficult, work will be burdensome, and murder will follow. The humans are exiled into a life separated from God and his goodness.

The story of Noah (Genesis 6-9) comes next. In it we see much the same pattern as in the stories of creation. First, using the flood, God basically "uncreates." He then creates anew, beginning with Noah, his family, and the creatures they saved from the flood. God told Adam to "be fruitful and multiply" and he now tells the same to Noah. God made a covenant with Adam, which Adam broke, and now enters into a more explicit covenant with Noah.

Finally, we come to another story of rebellion. Genesis 11 tells us how the humans weren't able to keep this covenant either. Instead, they built a tower to the heavens so that they might make a name for themselves. How human! The result is that God scatters the humans; in effect, sending them into exile yet again. Late in chapter 11, we are introduced to Abram, one person, chosen by God, with whom God will enter into yet another covenant, so that all the nations of the earth may be blessed and all creation renewed – but more on that next week, in this text box.

READING WITH HEART & MIND

These readings will take you further into the story of Jacob and his sons.

Monday, Genesis 29:1-14 Jacob arrives and meets Rachel. But this is only the beginning of a complicated family tale.

Tuesday, Genesis 29:15-30 Jacob marries Laban's daughters, including Rachel.

Wednesday, Genesis 29:31-30:24 Jacob has children. Keep your eye on Jacob's relationship with Rachel.

Thursday, Genesis 30:25-43 Jacob prospers at Laban's expense, setting up more turmoil.

Friday, Genesis 31:1-22 Again, Jacob must flee, this time from the wrath of Laban.

Saturday, Genesis 31:22-42 Laban chases after Jacob and catches up to him.

Sermon Notes

Growing Up Jesus

A look at the lives, beliefs, and practices of Jews in Jesus' day

A new Something Else series that begins today!

What was it like to grow up in Jesus' world? Learning to be better readers of the Bible means learning it to read in full, living color. And that means coming to Scripture with a better appreciation of the historical and cultural context. In the case of the gospels, we need a better handle of what it was like to be a Jew in Jesus' day. In this series, we'll look at a full range of questions that swirl around the lives, beliefs, and practices of first-century Jews. You'll be surprised at how much your understanding of the gospels will be deepened. There will be plenty of surprises along the way!

Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Jacob's first reaction to his experience in the night was to worship God. A few years ago, a Christian magazine had an article with a provocative title: "Worshipping the Lamb or Entertaining the Sheep?" Do you think we tend to come to church expecting to be entertained? What do you think is most important in a worship service? What would you like to see changed about our services at St. Andrew? What do you think God would like to see changed? What can we do to help ensure that our focus is on the true worship of God?
2. Jacob has to flee Esau's wrath. Alone, he heads northward. He is heading into exile. We may not often think of ourselves as living in exile, but loneliness and alienation are as common in Plano as they are anywhere. When I first joined the staff at St. Andrew I asked what the clergy thought to be the biggest problem faced by those in our community. The answer I got was "loneliness." Do you agree with this? What do you think are some of the causes of loneliness in our community? You might share some of your own experiences with loneliness. What does St. Andrew offer those who are lonely? Do we offer enough? How could we offer more?
3. Even in the reality of exile, the prophets always bring a message of hope, that there will be a return from exile. You might discuss the hope in our lives. What are some of the ways people go about dealing with loneliness, despair, and darkness in their lives? Alcohol? Sex? Shopping? Are such things really sources of "hope" or are they ways to divert or numb? Many Christians have difficulty embracing God's hope and presence in dark times. Have you experienced this yourself? What prevents us from always embracing and feeling God's love for us?