

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Proper 11-A (19 July 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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Collect

Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom, you know our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking: Have compassion on our weakness, and mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask; through the worthiness of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Genesis 28:10-19a, Psalm 139: 1-11, 22-23, Romans 8:12-25, Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

1 The Trickster and the Consequences

There had been a fight. Jacob, the patriarch, was on the run. An outlaw. A fugitive from justice. He was running for his life because he had done some bad things, some disreputable things, some unethical things.

Jacob had taken advantage of his brother's hunger and his brother's dull wits to cheat him out of his birthright, that favored place in their father's will that by law and tradition belonged to the oldest. Now that belonged to Jacob, stolen for the price of a bowl of lentil stew.

And if you think that's the only thing Jacob stole from Esau, the only time he took advantage of his brother, well, you may be forgiven for thinking well of Jacob because he is a patriarch. But his name was "Jacob," which means *schemer* or *trickster*, and it wasn't for nothing that he had been given that name. Jacob had a habit, a practiced ability, and the Bible just reports to us some of the highlights of his career. And Jacob's brother, Esau, was his most put-upon victim.

But Jacob's biggest win, his most flagrant felony, his most dastardly deed, was this. The narrative of the Old Testament completely centers around the blessing of God. If you follow the blessing as it is handed down from God to people, from parents to children, then you will see the story of what God is up to. That blessing was a potent idea of God's favor and God's intentions to do amazing things in a person's life and family. Abraham had passed on God's blessing to Isaac. When Isaac was nearing death and ready to pass it along, he intended to give it to his first-born son, as was the custom.

But just like the birthright, only worse, Jacob stole the blessing. Jacob actually dressed up in a sheepskin costume in order to fool his aging father into thinking he, smooth-skinned Jacob, was actually hairy Esau. Then Jacob cajoled Isaac into settling his blessing on Jacob.

This was the most important gift Isaac had to offer his sons. And, together with the property birthright, Jacob had stolen it from Esau, doing whatever it took to get it, and destroying relationships along the way. This was the last straw. This rupture would not be smoothed over. Esau swore he would kill Jacob, and Esau was capable of it. Jacob had to get out of town. So he took off running.

Jacob had gained both the birthright and the blessing. But he lost his relationships with his father and with his brother. He lost his connection to his family and it was no longer safe even for him to show up for reunions. He was set outside the family circle and, in a world without clear or lawful governance, to be without family or clan was to be without safety or resources. It was to be subject to being robbed, hurt, or enslaved by any passing stranger. So Jacob ran from the consequences of his actions, and as he did so ran right back to Haran, the place God had called Abraham to leave. Jacob, in effect, has lost the birthright by breaking those relationships: he won't inherit anything if he is nowhere to be found. And Jacob renounces God's blessing by going back to the very place from which Abraham was called out in order to receive that blessing. Jacob has lost it all.

2 A Dream of the House of God

On his way to Haran, Jacob stops for the night. He doesn't stop anywhere special: just wherever he happens to be when the sun went down. If you thought traveling alone by day was dangerous, traveling at night was suicidal! So Jacob stops and he settles in for the night – and then it happens.

Jacob has a dream. He sees a ladder. He sees God's servants ascending and descending on this ladder, running errands on behalf of God who is very much involved and active in the goings-on on earth. In this dusty nowhere where Jacob stopped for the night, God reveals God's self to Jacob. Maybe Jacob didn't leave God behind in the tents of Isaac after all. God doesn't accuse Jacob of running away, of cheating his brother, or deceiving his father. God doesn't question Jacob's suitability for the purposes of God. God instead renews God's covenant, the one that was handed down in the stolen blessing. Though Jacob is a cheat and trickster, God's purposes in the world, God's intentions, will not be stymied. Indeed, through Jacob and his offspring, says God, "all families of the earth shall be blessed." When Jacob awakes in the morning, he gives a name to that dusty nowhere where God encountered Jacob on the run, in the open, far from anything and anyone. Jacob calls the place "Bethel" which means "house of God." Beth Lehem means house of bread; Beth El means house of God. That place became a center for the worship of God for many centuries, and these days is associated with the Palestinian town of Beitin in the West Bank, about 12 miles north of Jerusalem.

The question this story raises in my mind is, how am I like Jacob? How have I acted with mixed motives, selfish intentions, or unethical goals? Whom have I cheated, deceived, or taken advantage of? What relationships in my life and in my society have experienced rupture because of what I did or didn't do? Where have I allowed injustice to linger and to corrode not only the lives of others, but my own moral sense? From what encounters and what responsibilities and what accountability have I fled, avoiding facing up to hard realities and things I just don't want to deal with?

What contexts of isolation and separation have been thrust upon us through no particular fault of our own? How have we experienced the isolation of Covid-19, being stuck in our homes and not giving hugs even to family members? How has the injustice of poverty or hunger in the world separated us from our neighbors, our fellow human beings, and made it difficult for us to be in relationship with them? How have we been isolated by things for which we might have been tempted to assign blame: by joblessness, by debt, by fights and emotional upset?

These were the kinds of things Jacob was fleeing, the kind of isolation he was experiencing as he pulled up a rock for a pillow in the middle of nowhere to spend the night. Yet even then, even there, God chose to reveal God's self to Jacob. In the midst of a pandemic, in the midst of protests and partisanship and personal pain, where has God revealed God's self to you? During a season when our church buildings are closed, where have you discovered another Beth El, another house of God?

3 The Reality of the House of God

Jacob, the patriarch, was on the run. An outlaw. A fugitive from justice. It was not for nothing that God later gave him the name "Israel" which means, "he strives or struggles or wrestles or fights with God." Even today we, Jacob's descendents in faith, continue to wrestle with God as we struggle to live in faith.

Jesus knows that experience. Jesus experienced conflict throughout his journey as a traveling teacher. In the garden on that last night, one of his disciples drew a sword, taking part in the fight in the only way he knew how. Jesus told him to put it away. Jesus was going to fight this a different way. Jesus found Beth El in the abandonment of the cross. On the cross Jesus yielded his birthright, yielded the blessing of God, to us: to anyone who would be willing to receive it.

Today, even as we continue encounter our own cruel crosses: there Jesus invites us to experience Beth El, to see God is present also. As we struggle in the isolation, tedium, boredom of social distancing, there is Beth El. As we struggle with broken relationships, with losses due to death, disease, distance, or disagreements, there is also Beth El.

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, all the families of the earth have been blessed. We have been blessed to encounter Beth El, the house of God, the presence of God, wherever we may be. Where this spring, where this week, where today, have you encountered God?

Amen.