

## **Father Abraham Had Many Sons (And Daughters):**

### **Jacob: A Place of Beginning Again**

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Genesis 35:1-4; 9-15

*God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel, and settle there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau." So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your clothes; then come, let us go up to Bethel, that I may make an altar there to the God who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone." So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak that was near Shechem.*  
Genesis 35:1-4

*God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and he blessed him. God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall you be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." So he was called Israel. God said to him, "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall spring from you. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you." Then God went up from him at the place where he had spoken with him. Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone; and he poured out a drink offering on it, and poured oil on it. So Jacob called the place where God had spoken with him Bethel. Genesis 35:9-15*

Let us pray. *Gracious God open us up to what you have for us today. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear your word in the midst of these words and then open up our hearts, God, that we might feel. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

I remember the first day, the first moment I fell in love with my wife Dee. I was 16 and she was 15. We were at an MYF Christmas Caroling party. Perhaps you remember MYF – Methodist Youth Fellowship. Those of you who have been Methodists a long time.

We were Christmas caroling and we were at somebody's house and we were gathered outside of the house and I think we were singing "Joy to the World," though it might have been something else. But she was doing a can-can down there and I thought, "I don't know who she was but she's doing the can-can." Turns out she was the daughter of the District Superintendent of the Methodist pastors there in town. So, at the party after, when we'd got back to the church, where we gathered in the youth room, I was lying on the floor and I don't know why, but I was. She walked by and I said, "Hey! Get me some Kool-Aid." I know how to talk to women – let me just say. I was so so smooth!

She said, "Okay." How about that? And she went got the Kool-Aid and she poured it on me. So I learned my lesson. I said, "She's the one for me." Love at first sight.

I remember the first day I fell in love with Jesus. We were at Little Grassy Lake at a youth retreat I'd been invited on. I hadn't been involved in the church at all until someone invited me to go on the retreat. There's a tabernacle there, an outdoor pavilion where they'd have worship. I really don't remember much about it, but I remember that place. I remember saying, "God, your grace is amazing and your love for me; I just can't believe it. And these people are so full of love for me, and I'll follow you."

It's a moment.

I want to talk today about two particular moments in the life of Jacob as we look at the long journey, the arc of his life. The first one you find in Genesis 28. Remember the context – Jacob is running away from his brother Esau who is after him to kill him. Jacob has stolen Esau's blessing and his birthright, all orchestrated by his mother Rebekah who we talked about last week. At the end of the first night's journey he lies down to sleep, he's running away, and he's afraid. He put his head down on a stone and he has a dream. It's a dream of angels going up and down a ladder.

That's Jacob's ladder, and the scholars and the rabbis have talked about the symbolism of Jacob's ladder, there are a thousand different things. There's no simple understanding of what the ladder was about but just note it was a thin place. That's where we sense the very presence of God, where heaven and earth are connected. And you think, "I'm in a place right here is the presence of God."

So it was that moment, and in that dream, God gave him the covenant that he had given to Abraham and to Isaac before him. If you leave this summer with one thing, I hope you remember the three components of the covenant that God promised to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, that he would give him the land of Israel, the Promised Land, the land of Canaan. Also, he would give him descendants, as many as the sand of the sea and stars in the sky. And that he would make his name a blessing, and through him the whole world would be blessed.

So he gave him those same pieces of the covenant there at that place.

There are three things I want you to see about this particular moment. The first is that God initiated this. Jacob did not. Jacob didn't cry out, "God, help me!" God initiated this.

We believe God chose us before we chose God. We call that prevenient grace – grace that precedes any response. The Christian faith is primarily not about what we've done, but about what God has done. God has chosen us – claimed us. God reaches out and says, "Here's what I'm going to do with you."

The second thing I want you to see in this story is that Jacob responded. When he woke, he promised God, "Yes, God, I will go with you." But I want you to note, maybe the best way I could say it, is the immaturity of his response. Because he didn't say, "No matter what happens I'm going with you. I trust you, I'll serve you." He said, "*If* you will give me enough food to eat and clothes to wear and if you'll take care of me... and if you'll make life go swell (that's Pace interpretation) if you just make life easy for me, I will follow you. I'll give you tenth of what you've given me."

But he made that commitment. I sometimes think about how the church is kind of like getting married. When you come to Christ, you're making that commitment. But you should be making it "for better or worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health..." That wasn't Jacob's commitment. It was *if then*.

Sometimes that how we make it. We may say, "Boy, God, you're making life great for me. I'm going to follow you." Then when it gets not so great it gets harder.

The third thing I want you to see in this story is that he symbolizes that by taking a stone and pouring oil on it. We call that an Ebenezer. So you just sang it a bit ago and a bunch of you didn't realize what an Ebenezer was, but you sang it anyway.

Ebenezer literally means "Stone of Help" and it's the place where you can say, "You helped me, God. This is the place where you reached out. This is the moment. This is the tabernacle where I made that confession of Christ to you."

There comes a point in which you finally have to decide. All of you come in different ways. Some of you grew up in the church, some of you grew up in other churches, some of you grew up in other faith traditions. Some of you grew up not believing at all, some of you came to faith as adults. Some of you grew up in the church and it was only after you'd been in the church as an adult for 15 or 20 years that you thought, "Yes, I'm in! I'm going to commit myself to this. I believe this. I'm going to follow you and I'm going to seek to live and love like you, Jesus."

But at some point, you're going to have to finally decide. When we bring confirmands here for confirmation – we had 70 this year – those who came forward. They've grown up in the church and been taught in the children's department about who Jesus is and how he loves them. They learn what it means to follow Jesus. But at that moment when they come for confirmation they have to finally decide, "Yes, I'm in." That was that moment for Jacob.

Now from thereon lots of stuff happens. I've not talked about the geography here but it's important. God spoke to Abraham first when he was up at Haran, near what is now the Turkish-Syrian border. So Haran is about 20 miles north of the Syrian border in what is now Turkey. And that whole area of southern Turkey and northern Syria was called Paddan-Aram, where his family was. Abram left his father and his brother there. He and his clan, with his wife, they came south, and they came all the way down to Beersheba. They even went on down to Egypt at one point because there was a famine.

They settled in Beersheba which is in the very southern part of Israel. In fact you'll hear people say, "Yes, Israel is from Dan to Beersheba," meaning from the very northern tip to the south. Beersheba is in the Negev desert. That's where Abram had settled. That was where Isaac was when he sent his servant Eliezer way back up to Haran. It's 600 miles by the way. Way back up to Haran to get a wife from his own people and he brought back Rebekah. And how Jacob is fleeing from his brother and he's going back up there again. So he makes this 600-mile journey up to Haran.

When he's there he marries his first cousins – two of them, of all things. So his uncle becomes his father-in-law. He has 11 sons and a daughter. His father-in-law exploits him and tricks him and then later he exploits and tricks his father-in-law right back and becomes very, very, very rich. Then he realizes that he has to go back and make amends with his brother. So he leaves Haran and starts the journey back again.

On the way back he runs into God, and he has a wrestling match with God. Then he goes and finds his brother. He learns his brother is coming at him with 400 men, so he makes peace with his brother.

Now we didn't tell you this next part of the story. His daughter Dinah is raped by the men of Shechem, so his sons decide to take revenge on all the men of Shechem and slaughter all of them. Lots of water under the bridge! Twenty years minimum. Some of the scholars read scripture to say 40 years.

All that time has passed, and Jacob comes back to the same place, to Bethel. He realizes that this is a special sacred place. And that it's time for him to make a recommitment of his life. That God has seen him through all these things, has kept him through the good and the bad and the mistakes he's made. Through the triumphs, the wealth and God has kept him through all those things, so he recommits himself. He starts over.

He comes to this place and there are four things I really want you to see about this. They're similar but a little bit different.

The first thing is that this is really initiated by Jacob. He says, "We're going to repent. So let's take all of our foreign gods and let's put them away. We're going to put away all of our foreign gods."

Repentance means not just confessing our sins but changing direction. And it's not just because you've done something really terrible. If I look at my own life, I make that commitment to Christ there at the tabernacle at Little Grassy Lake, but since then all sorts of "life" has come to pass. Priorities just kind of change and you find yourself chasing these other gods, such as success, happiness, wealth, and all those things that somehow become important to you.

And then you wonder what happened to that zeal I had for Jesus. What happened to me really caring about this and it has sort of now just become something else. To repent is to say, "I'm going to put those other gods away and put my life back in right priority."

It doesn't mean you'll have the same sort of zeal and it's not this big emotional thing. It's not that immature faith. That's the second thing. He makes a commitment to follow but this time there's no "if then" in it. There's no "*If* you take care of me. *If* you do good things for me, I will follow you." No, it's, "Hey, man, we've made it this far together. Sometimes I wandered off. Sometimes I did stupid things. But here I am, and I recommit myself to following you. For better for worse, for richer, for poorer... no matter what, I'm with you."

Here's what's so interesting. He's not doing this so life will be swell for him. This time the very next thing that happens in this story is that his wife, the wife that he loved the most, dies in childbirth. This is Rachel and her son who lives – Benjamin – she names Benoni which means “Son of my sorrow.” It doesn't mean life's going to be great, to make that commitment. But you make that moment of recommitment of your life.

The third thing I want you to see is that God then says, “I want you to remember your identity. You're no longer just Jacob, you're Israel.” He'd already been named as Israel when he wrestled with God, just a few chapters earlier, but now he's reminding him, saying, “Remember, you're Israel - I chose you. Amazing things are going to happen through you. I have purposes in mind for you. Don't you forget – I chose *you*. This isn't about you choosing me, this about me choosing you. And this is who you are. You belong to me.”

When we come back and recommit ourselves, it isn't just that we have made this overture; it's that God is saying and reminding us, “This is about what I'm going to do in your life, and I want to do *through* your life in the world around you. I chose you. And you may not think you're worthy, but I chose you anyway – don't forget that.”

Then finally Jacob creates another Ebenezer. He sets up the stone, pours a drink offering on it. Pours oil on it, to say, “This is the place. This is the place where I've recommitted my life, to being a part of God's purposes for me.”

I've shared this with you all before but it's such a significant thing for me that I come back to it periodically and I can't think of a better example. My grandfather, a Methodist pastor before we were United Methodist. My uncle is a United Methodist pastor. When my grandfather died, I got all his Bibles, he had about 50. I don't know what you're going to do with all these Bibles. They all say the same thing so it's not like there's a reason to have a bunch of all these Bibles. They all say the same thing.

About 40 of the 50 Bibles were King James Version so they're even harder to read. At some point I'm trying to think of what I'm going to do with all these Bibles. I didn't feel like I could throw them away, and I didn't think I could give them away. I didn't know what to do with them. I looked through them all and came across this one that seemed to be the one that was most worn. I opened it and here's what's written on the inside cover. It reads, “Crockett, Texas, August 27, 1941. This day I have entered into a new and more intimate relationship with Jesus. I think things will be different from here on out. D.L. Landrum.”

This was his Ebenezer. He said, "I'm going to take that Bible and I'm going to mark that this is the place where I recommit myself to what God has in mind for me."

There's a wonderful song in "Jesus Christ Superstar" where Mary Magdalene and Peter sing to Jesus and they say, "Could we just start again, please? Could we just start again? Could we just begin again?"

I don't know what it is that you need to begin again in. Maybe it's your marriage - that somehow, you've drifted apart. It's just time to start again. Maybe it's a friendship that's been broken because words were spoken that were hurtful, but that relationship matters to you. Maybe it's sobriety. You were doing pretty well and then you fell off the wagon and now it's time to start again. Maybe it's something with your job, or maybe it's your finances and you went bankrupt, and now it's time to start again.

Here it was his spiritual life. That's at the core of all of it. To just have a time of starting again.

There is a poem by Louise Fletcher Tarkington that's called "The Land of Beginning Again." It goes this way:

"I wish that there were some wonderful place  
Called the Land of Beginning Again  
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches  
And all of our poor selfish grief  
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat by the door  
And never be put on again."

Just put it behind you, friends.

"So he named that place..." It was originally called Luz and then he said, "This is the house of God - Bethel." *Beit* in Hebrew is *house*. Bethlehem. Bethphage. Those all mean *house*. Bethlehem means *house of bread*. Bethel - house of God. This is the house of God. This is a place of beginning again.

Now there's one other way that we begin again. Sometimes it's we have committed terrible things we feel like and we just want a fresh start. Sometimes it's we've sort of faded away and we're looking to reconnect with our relationship with God. But it's interesting. The rhythm of the world is built that every single day we get to start again. Every single day. "New every morning, thy mercies I see."

I think about the long-distance runner who laces up her shoes. She walks out to the road every morning, she takes a deep breath and she starts to run. Let's start again.

Every day we're given that opportunity to receive God's forgiveness. To begin again. To claim that ongoing ability to start over. That's an amazing gift from God.

So that's what this place is. This is a place of beginning again. It's the House of God, so I hope it's where we make our first commitment of our lives to Christ. We shape these kids. They come for confirmation, we hope this is a place where you even might make your first confession of your faith in Christ and a willingness to live and love like Jesus did.

This is a place where through that journey of ups and downs, and bad things and good things, all that water that goes under the bridge. I don't know what's gone on in your life, all of it isn't great I suspect. Some of it's been awesome. But this is a place where we go through that together, where we claim God's presence in good times and bad times, and we celebrate together, and we grieve together. And God blesses all of that. This is that place where we have the opportunity to recommit ourselves, to start over again. And this is that place where day after day, and week after week we reclaim God's promise of God's love for us, and every day we start over once again.

Bethel. The House of God.

*Gracious and loving God, we see your presence over the whole arc of our lives. When we make that first commitment of ourselves to you, responding to your grace that's been at work since we were born. The way you've seen us through thick and thin, good and bad, all that water under the bridge. Then times of starting over again. We're so grateful that you keep giving those to us time and time again. So, God, we pray that we might not let that grace go to waste but would receive it and respond to it by giving ourselves back to you. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.*