

## *Jacob's Dream: He Deserved a Nightmare*

Summer is the season of vacations and family weekends. Parents, if you have spent too many hours with your children, and think they are horrible creatures, let me assure you that you are wrong. Children, if you have spent too much time with your parents on a vacation or family trip and think that they are nuts, let me assure you that you are also wrong!

One of the perks to seriously studying Genesis is that you are introduced to the family of Abraham and Sarah, and they are a family that is crazier than your family! Allow me a few minutes to retell the family story, one that we have been listening to for over a month.

A few weeks ago, in Genesis 22, Abraham and his son, Isaac, were traveling, and during that trip God commanded Abraham to take Isaac up the mountain to offer him as a sacrifice. Thankfully, God provided a ram, sparing Abraham from having to go through with it. Imagine the scene when Abraham and Isaac returned home to Sarah, and Isaac started telling his mother about the trip. You can almost hear Sarah yelling: "You about did what to my son, you crazy old man?" This isn't your normal family!

Two weeks ago we read from Genesis 24, and in that part of the story, we hear about Sarah's death. Her death accentuates the fact that Isaac doesn't have a woman in his life.

Now, if Father Abraham's parenting skills were called into question on the mountain, things were quickly put to rest when Abraham attempts to find his son a wife.

Abraham sent his servants to Sarah's homeland, and when they reached the end of their journey they went to the well for water and stumbled upon a beautiful woman named Rebekah. God made it clear to the servants that Rebekah was the one for Isaac.

In that story, we saw Rebekah riding into the village on the camel, and she sees Isaac in the field and she falls head over heels in love.

If you were here on Sunday, July 6, you remember that passage ended in a rather unusual way—Isaac takes Rebekah into his dead mother's tent (into his deceased mother's bed) to do the very thing that lovers do! Where is Freud when you need him? Yes, this family is crazier than yours.

The story continued last week in Genesis 25. Isaac and Rebekah find themselves expecting twins. Esau is born first and Jacob follows grasping Esau's ankle.

As for the new parents, Isaac loves his son Esau more than Jacob, and Rebekah loves Jacob more than Esau. Let's review Parenting 101—showing love to one child and neglecting the other is a perfect way to create a crazy and dysfunctional family.

In Genesis 25, tensions between the brothers continued to escalate. It happens one day when Esau returns from a long hunt. Jacob knew Esau had been hunting, so he starts grilling a few filets about the time Esau walks through the door.

Esau was starved and wanted something to eat, so Jacob, full of resentment, said, "If you want this steak and beer, then give me your birthright." Esau said, "Take my birthright; just give me the food." And that is where the story ended last week.

Unfortunately, our lectionary decides to skip from Genesis 25 to Genesis 28. That move doesn't make much sense because Genesis 27 is an important part of the family story.

In Genesis 27, Isaac is drawing closer to death, so he orders his last supper. Isaac turns to Esau, his favorite son, and says, "Go hunt some game, make me dinner, and if you do this successfully, I will give you a special blessing."

Now, I want you to think about what happens when the patriarch or matriarch in your family gets close to death. You ever noticed how the family starts acting crazy? How certain family members desire a special blessing or gift? And if there isn't a lot of love between siblings, there is a good chance you will see some scheming and deceiving.

Well, that is exactly what happens in Genesis 27!

Rebekah and Jacob do not want Esau to get the special blessing and they come up with a great plan. They realize that Isaac is old and blind, so Jacob secretly prepares a feast and dresses up in some of Esau's hunting clothes. Isaac tastes the delicious food, sees / feels the camouflage clothing and extends the blessing to Jacob instead of Esau. The trick works! Jacob gets the blessing and Esau is furious!

Thus, at the end of Genesis 27, Esau is plotting revenge; actually, Esau starts planning a murder. Rebekah overhears Esau's plan and tells Jacob that he must flee the country. She tells him to go to her homeland and reach out to her brother. It was the only way for Jacob to stay alive.

So Jacob leaves and we encounter him today (Genesis 28) in the midst of his journey. After cheating his brother (not once, but twice) and deceiving his dying father, you would think that Jacob had some feeling of guilt, perhaps enough to keep him awake at night. Instead, Jacob sleeps like a baby, even when he is forced to use a rock as a pillow.

What happens next baffles me: God comes to Jacob in a dream.

Now, if I were in God's shoes, Jacob's dream would be a terrifying nightmare. After all that cheating and scheming, that is what he deserves! Yet, God does something radically different. Instead of giving Jacob "Holy Hell," God gives him "Holy Heaven," a dream reserved for the saints.

It is a dream with a ladder connecting heaven and earth, with angels ascending and descending. It contains the promise of many descendants, and concludes with God saying that He will be with Jacob wherever he may go.

When Jacob awakes, he realizes that God's love isn't contingent upon his worthiness, or lack thereof. God's love is unconditional. It's a message that we call grace. In Romans 5, St. Paul writes, "where sin increases, grace abounds all the more." Those words definitely ring true when we hear the story of Jacob's Dream.

When Jacob experience God's grace, when the seed is sown into his heart, it takes his life in a different direction. In a few weeks, we will hear the story of Jacob wanting to go home and reconcile with his brother, Esau. God's grace will take the story in a different direction.

So, what does Jacob's dream have to do with us and with our lives? Well, Jacob's dream becomes a reality many years later when one of his descendants ascends and descends a ladder connecting heaven to earth. That ladder is the cross and that descendant is Jesus of Nazareth. And like Jacob no matter where we are in life's journey, or who we are, or what we have done, the cross is a dream that comes true! The cross reminds us "that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The cross is a reminder that "where sin increases, grace abounds all the more." And like Jacob, when we experience grace, when the seeds are sown in our heart, when it takes root in our lives, be prepared...be prepared...be prepared for God's grace to your crazy life story in a different direction! AMEN.

*Parts of this sermon were inspired from "Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who" by Frederick Buechner.*

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