

A Place of Blessing

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July 17, 2011

"Take these shoes
Click clacking down some dead end street
Take these shoes
And make them fit.

Take this shirt
Polyester white trash made in nowhere
Take this shirt
And make it clean, clean.

Take this soul
Stranded in some skin and bones
Take this soul
And make it sing"

In their recent song "Yahweh," the band U2 puts to poetry a prayer that many of us may have had occasion to offer.

Have you ever been unhappy with the way your life was shaping out? Have you ever wished for a new start, with some sort of confidence in the direction you were going?

As we continue our journey with Jacob this month, we see that our ancestor in the faith has been there, too. As one commentator puts it, Jacob finds himself in this passage somewhere between a conflict-ridden past and an uncertain future.

In last week's reading, we were introduced to Jacob and his twin brother, Esau. We watched as these two very different sons of Isaac and Rebekah grew up, one favored by his mother, and one favored by his father. Jacob, the schemer, tricked Esau into trading his birthright for a cup of lentil stew.

Between that reading, and our passage for today, more has happened in the life of this dysfunctional family of the faith. Having stolen Esau's birthright, Jacob next, goaded by his mother, tricks his father into giving him a special blessing. This blessing guarantees his place as head of the family.

When Esau finds out he has lost both birthright and blessing, he becomes violent, and swears that he will kill his twin. So Jacob leaves, fleeing for his life in an unknown land. And this is where we find him today, traveling aimlessly from place to place, running from his murderous brother, when he becomes too tired to continue, and finds a place to rest.

With only a rock for a pillow, Jacob falls into a deep sleep and dreams a strange dream of angels and ladders.

In the midst of this dream, Jacob hears the voice of God speaking to him. The blessing he hears from God is no random promise, but the exact blessing given first to Abraham, then Isaac, and now Jacob.

The biblical promise of Progeny, land, and to be a blessing to the world is now Jacob's promise as well. He is part of the Abrahamic covenant.

God assures him, I am with you, I will go with you, I will not leave you.

With this gesture, God emphasizes that God is not just the God of the past. Rather, at the very point at which Jacob is most vulnerable, God asserts that God is also the God of Jacob. The God of the present and of the future.

Again, from the commentator I mentioned before:

It is significant that God's interruption of Jacob's anxious journey, which displays God's renewed commitment to Jacob in his own right, does not contain a word of judgment regarding Jacob's prior actions with regard to his brother and his father. Rather God's address to Jacob contains one unconditional promise after the other. In this grace-filled encounter, we see how God can transform an ordinary stone and an ordinary place into something special; a place where God's presence has made a home in the world. Similarly, this trickster who has deceived his father and brother, and who since birth has lived in strife with the people around him can be transformed by God into a richly blessed man who serves as a source of God's blessing to others.

Blessed to be a blessing, even when we are at our most vulnerable.

While at this year's General Synod gathering, I often found myself surrounded by reminders of God's presence in this world. Halfway through the week, my friend George and I were walking back to our hotel after a late night gathering on the other side of town. As I said, it was late, we were tired, and the area we needed to go through was not exactly the greatest.

As we walked, I heard a voice calling out. "Excuse me, excuse me, are you part of the convention?"

Now, a gathering of over 3,000 people for a week's worth of work doesn't go without notice. Synod had piqued the interest of the local folks in town.

As I looked, I immediately recognized the man speaking. Earlier, I had seen him on the street, walking his bike, trying to talk to people as they passed by. Asking the same question, "are you part of the convention? Are you part of the convention?" I was behind a group of people with bright red synod bags, nametags and buttons who answered brusquely and kept moving. I had smiled at him then, but didn't stop, either.

"Mr. George!" the man called out.

George stopped dead in his tracks, and said, "Mike!" I'm glad to see you again!"

It turns out that earlier in the day, George had also come across Mike and his bike. Having just given some money to another homeless man named Frank, George was unable to spare anything for Mike, but had since moved some cash out of his wallet and into his pocket in case they crossed paths again.

He reached out, and shook Mike's hand, a five dollar bill peeking out, visible between their fingers.

George apologized for not being able to help earlier.

"No, no," Mike said. "I don't want your money. I want you to pray for me."

Still clasping George's hand, Mike began a story of hardship and trial. Vulnerable and open, he admitted some mistakes, and shared his hopeful plan for getting off the street. He again asked George for prayer.

"I think the lady should pray," George replied, humbled. So I joined my hands with theirs, that five dollar bill still sticking out of the top of their grasp, and I prayed. I couldn't tell you one word that escaped my lips, which only tells me it was the holy spirit moving in that moment.

As I finished, I expected to walk away, but it was then that Mike began to pray for us. For the convention, for the people studying God in Tampa, for us to have a good gathering, and to be blessed.

George would later write to his congregation: *it was a holy moment of life and of peace: the three of us, standing on the city street, close to midnight, holding hands; black and white, male and female, straight and gay, north and south.*

God met Jacob out in the world in the midst of his anxiety, his fear, and his suffering. God meets us in our lives, right where we are, too.

Whether we are just out on parole, making our way on the streets, or strangers in a strange land just trying to make our way home.

No matter who we are, or where we are on life's journey, God is with us. This is the assurance Jacob was given as he ran from his home and his family. This is the promise Jacob was to understand, as he is woven into the Abrahamic covenant of progeny, land, and blessing.

A covenant we are part of through our participation in the new covenant we know through Jesus Christ. We, too, are blessed to be a blessing.

As he woke from his dream, Jacob said, surely God is in this place and I didn't know it.

God is in this place, he said. God is even in this place.

Friends, God is in all times, and all places, and we are each blessed to be a blessing.

There is an ancient Celtic tradition of building cairns – a traveler will set one rock on top of another to say I saw God in this place, and to let others know that the ground they are standing on is holy ground.

This sounds much like what Jacob does here with his stone. The rough pillow of emptiness, distress, and pain is turned into a marker of God's holy presence and blessing., just as our very lives can turn to markers of God's grace.

As you head into your week, I invite you to look for signs of God's presence in your life as well. In the ordinary, and the extraordinary. In the magical and the mundane. Where is God calling out to you, offering you comfort and grace - even in times of insecurity and suffering?

Because God is in this place. In your life. On every step of your journey, walking with you, offering you love and grace.

We began with a song from U2, I would like us to end with a song as a prayer, the words to a hymn written by UCC songwriter Christopher Grundy. His song Here in this place is a plea for the presence of God, and includes the words,

Holy one may your presence here open our minds
May your spirit among us help us to find
you are rising up now like a fountain of grace
from the holy ground here in this place.

May God's spirit rise up around you like a fountain of grace in the days and weeks ahead.

Amen.