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The National Presbyterian Church

Fellow Followers: "Jacob the Chastened: Learning Slowly"

Genesis 29:1-30

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In our sermons here at National through the spring and on through the summer we're looking at various people in the Bible. The Bible is a book that is filled not only with heavy theology; the Bible is a book that is filled not only with poems like the Psalms; the Bible is filled not just with rules and regulations; the Bible is also filled with stories about people. Not only the central story – about our Lord Jesus Christ – but all kinds of other stories about people. And these people are our ancestors in the faith. They are the ones who have gone before us, our parents in the faith. And we are to learn from them. Sometimes from their goodness, sometimes from their badness! Sometimes we are to learn what to do, sometimes what not to do! Just as our physical ancestors affect who we are, for example by genetics or by accomplishments, so God has given us these people in the pages of scripture to influence the shape of our lives, and to help us to understand who we are to be as faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

Today, then, we continue this series by looking together for the second time at a man by the name of Jacob. Jacob is a person who lived somewhere around 1800 years before the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ (give or take a hundred years or two!), and his story takes up a remarkable amount of space in Genesis, the opening book of the Bible. His story begins in chapter 25, and we keep hearing about him through to the end of the book (in the context of the story that is told about his son, Joseph). That's almost 50% of the book of Genesis. Jacob's story is a powerful story, a dominant story in the first book in the Bible, pointing to Jacob's importance for those who are his descendants by faith.

And yet when we read about him, especially in his early life, he turns out to be a scoundrel, an unlovable kind of a person who does everything wrong with his life. He is a manipulative, he is a deceiving cheat. He will do anything that it takes to get what he wants. He will deceive even his own brother when his brother is hungry; and he will lie to even his own father when his father is blind. What he wants is to be top dog. He's the second of a set of twins. He wants to be acknowledged as the first. He wants to get the inheritance of the family. He wants the primary blessing of his father. And he gets it! What we heard last Sunday was that by his conniving he got what he wanted. He got it! But having got it, he got nothing. He was trapped. He was just like Macbeth in Shakespeare's play: Macbeth gets the throne of Scotland by doing something terrible, and

then what he has done comes back to haunt him. So there is no freedom. There is no joy. There is no satisfaction.

In Jacob's case he has to flee for his life. When his brother Esau comes to his senses and realizes what his brother has done to him, he wants to kill Jacob. And he can do it: he is powerful and he is strong and he will do it.

So Jacob has to flee for his life, and for the rest of his life Jacob pays for his outrageous behavior. Jacob pays for his behavior with two decades of exile. And he pays for it, too, as he watches his own sons in years to come demonstrating the worst of his traits.

Surely this is a parent's worst fear, that our children will demonstrate the worst of our traits! Jacob's sons may not have seen Jacob at his worst, but they would have heard the stories. They would have known what went on, and they repeated Jacob's behavior in their own lives.

- In time Jacob's sons would grow jealous of one of their brothers Joseph.
- In time they would treat their brother despicably, in this case selling him into slavery.
- In time they would deceive their father with a lie that they would tell again and again and again as the years went by.

So there is a sadness in the story of Jacob. And there is also a sad kind of justice.

But there is also, thank God, redemption, good news, in the story of Jacob. That is, while Jacob remains far from perfect all his life, at the same time what we read as we read through the second half of Genesis is that Jacob's life is changed – and changed radically. Not perfectly but radically; so the Jacob we meet at the end of his life, at the end of the story, is not the same person that he was at the beginning of this story.

If we were to read through David Brooks' new book, *"The Road to Character,"* you'd find him speaking about different kinds of virtues within our lives. There are what he calls "résumé virtues" – what you do to get ahead and get a job; and there are what he calls "eulogy virtues" – the kinds of things you would want people to say about you on your tombstone or at your funeral service when life is over.

- As far as Jacob's résumé virtues would be concerned, what we would discover is that as Jacob's life progresses he proves that he was very, very smart. He would get A's in everything. Top of his class. What we would find is that he would become a shrewd businessman and farmer, that he became an expert breeder of sheep. If he were a breeder of horses his horse would have won yesterday's Kentucky Derby. That's how good he was. His résumé would say that he had made a ton of money and he'd risen to the top and he knew how to win in the end.
- But it's his eulogy virtues that would come as a surprise. In his later years his eulogy virtues would tell us that he had become courageous and even generous. Who Jacob? This rogue of a person? This unlovable person becomes courageous and generous?

Yes. And he'd become a man of faith and prayer. We'd be tempted to say that these things were superficial, a front, phony because we know that that's not who he is! But no: real faith, real prayer – wrestling with God! Indeed, by the end of his life he'd also become patient and evidenced a measure of humility that led him, even at the risk of his life, to seek reconciliation with his brother and his father. Courage and humility and prayer were all involved in this amazing movement towards reconciliation with those whom he had cheated and deceived and to whom he had lied.

So, while Jacob does not become perfect, yet towards the end of his life he is nevertheless radically different. Which leaves us asking *how this change, how this redemption, how this transformation in his life happened? How is it that this person was here and now he's there, not the same as he was before?*

Well, as we read through this story of Jacob in Genesis what we come to see is that it happened slowly, not overnight. It happened slowly, through specific events and through the passage of time. It happened through a number of experiences which Jacob had in which he sensed not only the presence of God and the promises of God but through which he sensed as well his own powerlessness and his own weakness. It happened through times in which it seemed as if God was very, very far away, as well as through those times in which God seemed very, very close indeed.

Jacob first experienced the closeness of God at a place called Bethel. We find the story in Genesis Chapter 28. At that time Jacob was fleeing for his life. He was fleeing from everything that he had ever known. He was in the middle of nowhere and night fell; as far as we know, his first night away from home. And sometimes it's at night that we feel most the burden of life, and the burden of our own shortcomings; the bad things we do or think come back to haunt us. Well at that very moment when Jacob should have been haunted by the bad things he had done, something wonderful happened. God drew close to Jacob in a dream. Jacob dreamt that Heaven and Earth had drawn close to each other, so close that there was a ladder connecting Heaven and Earth, and the ladder was busy! There was more interaction between heaven and earth, between God and humankind than he could have ever imagined – as if all this divine activity was a sign that God was at work with him too, despite his behavior and sin. And this was a powerful dream in his life. This experience of the presence and the activity of God.

Of course, every dream ends. In the story Jacob wakes up and the experience is gone. But what has not gone is a word that God speaks in that dream; a word of promise that God gives to Jacob and that he cannot forget. The promise is this, in Genesis 28 at Verse 13. God says to him,

“I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac.
The land in which you lie I will give to you and your offspring and your
offspring shall be like the dust of the Earth and you shall spread abroad to

the west and to the east and to the north and to the south and all the families of the Earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring [DR: the “offspring” mentioned here includes Jesus Christ because of whom we are here in this place today. This was a promise given 2000 years before Jesus is born to this scoundrel Jacob! The promise continues . . .]. Know that I am with you and will keep you (that is protect you) wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

This is a fivefold promise: (1) I’ll be with you, (2) I will keep and protect you, (3) I’ll bring you back to your family, (4) I will never leave you, (5) I will accomplish my purpose even through your life.

And this promise is a word of sheer grace. Jacob hasn’t earned this promise. He doesn’t deserve the friendship and the grace of God. Yet what we find is that God commits himself to Jacob freely and passionately despite everything Jacob has done – despite his flaws, his sins, his deceit.

Jacob’s experience was probably not too dissimilar to the experience of John Wesley on a particular night that he records in his journal; On May the 24th, 1738, Wesley wrote this:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a meeting in Aldersgate Street in London where someone was reading Martin Luther’s preface to Paul’s letter to the Romans. At about a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine and saved me from the law of sin and death.

Wesley had known all this stuff before. He knew about God. He knew about the scripture but something happened in this moment where what he knew in his head moved into his heart and into every part of his being and it transformed his ministry from that day on.

I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation and an assurance was given me; as if God had singled him out. He had taken away my sins, even mine and saved me from the law of sin and death.

And this knowledge of grace which he didn’t ask for and didn’t deserve, this undeserved favor, this second chance in life, changed Wesley’s life forever. And it did for Jacob too. It humbled him. Sometimes we are humbled when somebody comes and tells us that we’ve done something wrong and we ought to shape up. But more often than not we are humbled and changed by the person who says “I know who you are but I love you anyway. Now come on, let’s start again; let’s start again and see how we can do.”

So Jacob was humbled by this grace. It brought him to his knees and it softened his heart and gave him a chance to start again. It put him in great company with Saint Peter who denied Jesus at Jesus' moment of need; and with Saint Paul who persecuted the church; and with Saint Augustine and many others who were far off from God and yet God sought them out.

When this dream was over, this experience of God's presence – and it was over just as quickly as it came – the sense of promise lingered and Jacob's journey continued. He headed on his way further and further away from anything he knew, though now it seemed as if God was guiding him. Indeed, when his journey came to an end, it was because he ended up near the city of Haran at the home of his mother's family (in what is now south eastern Turkey, northern Syria and northwestern Iraq). All seemed to be well. He had found a new home, a second home, and it must have seemed as if God's promises in the dream would be with him, as if life might be like a wonderful dream from that moment on . . . Until Jacob was rudely awakened by the situation occurred in our passage of scripture, in Genesis 29.

At Haran, Jacob met his match! He came face to face with his uncle Laban who was a nastier piece of work than Jacob had ever been, and who gives Jacob a taste of his own medicine. In Genesis 29 we read that Jacob loves Laban's younger daughter Rachel. He's willing to work for Laban for seven years in order to win his bride Rachel. But when the moment comes for marriage Laban does a switch. He switches his daughters! And out of the blue claims that the elder daughter Leah must marry first, before Rachel, and that if Jacob still wants to marry Rachel then Jacob is going to have to work for another seven years to get the one he loves.

Another seven years! Seven years more! And there's nothing Jacob can do. He's absolutely powerless. There is no one who can take his side. Laban is far more powerful than he is. Jacob is all on his own, and Laban has done to Jacob what Jacob has done to his brother and to his father. And there's nothing he can do. There's no plan he can conceive of now to manipulate the situation and to get himself out of the trouble. Jacob the swindler has been swindled. Jacob the trickster has been tricked and there's no quick fix in sight. This is not just a one day blip on the screen or a one week blip on the screen, or even a one year blip on the screen. This is going to take 14 years for Jacob to work his way through. Seven and seven. Indeed, as the story unfolds further we discover that the 14 year problem turns into a 20 year problem as Laban swindles Jacob yet again and adds six more years onto Jacob's time of exile.

So imagine this, Jacob spending (or you and me spending) 20 years of life, with a person, any person, over whom we have absolutely no control who can make our life miserable whenever they want. Living for 20 years with somebody over whom we have no control who has no love for us, and who can make our lives miserable whenever they want.

- With no way out . . . Unless of course the promises of God are true.
- No way out . . . Unless the experience of God at Bethel was true.
- No way out . . . Unless God is more powerful than Laban
- No way out . . . Unless God actually really meant it when he said to Jacob at Bethel, *“Know that I am with you and will keep you and protect you wherever you go and I will bring you back to this land.”*
 . . . Unless God meant it when he indicated that where Jacob was right now was not the place he was going to be at the end (God would bring him back).
 . . . Unless God’s presence really was close at hand, whether he felt it or not (I am with you and will keep you).
 . . . Unless God really did have plans and purposes for Jacob that no one, not even Laban, could destroy or take away, no matter how much they tricked you or seemed to have power over you (I will fulfil my promise to you).

So, Jacob was trapped – unless the promises of God were true. And unless the grace of God was also true – that God didn’t care what Jacob has done in the past, but loved him anyway, and had committed himself to Jacob, for Jacob’s good, forever.

And what we come to realize is that, in fact, Jacob does indeed trust this promise. Throughout those 20 years he trusts the promise of God. The experience of God’s presence, the sense of God’s closeness, may come and go in those 20 years, but the promise of God never fades even in those moments when God seems to be powerfully absent. And so it’s within these 20 years that Jacob’s life is changed.

Over the long haul, not the short haul, by faith, not by sight, with some experiences in his mind but with the promises of God in his head and in his life.

Many years ago, someone wrote these words, a poem, which surely applies to God’s ways not only with Jacob but with us too. I know they’re not politically correct – they speak about “men” but they really refer to men and women! The words go like this.

When God wants to drill a man and thrill a man and skill a man;
 When God wants to mold a man to play the noblest part;
 When God yearns with all his heart to create so great and bold a man
 that all the world shall be amazed: watch his methods, watch his ways.
 How God bends but never breaks, when his good he undertakes;
 When he uses whom he chooses, and with every purpose infuses him
 By every act induces him, to try his splendor out;
 God knows what he’s about.

Even, and perhaps especially, in those moments when we think that God knows nothing about our lives and couldn’t care less about us “God knows what he’s about.” And on this truth our ancestor-by-faith, Jacob, depended; in this truth Jacob came to believe thorough moments in which God seemed powerfully present or mysteriously absent; in years in which nothing seemed to be going his way; and in moments when

everything seemed to be going his way. Jacob came to see that God knew what he was about and had showered his grace on Jacob (as God showers his grace on us through Jesus Christ) and would never pull it away.

So my friends wherever you are today in life – flying free like a bird, or feeling you are in some kind of cage; whether life is like a pleasant stroll, or a forced march, remember Jacob! Remember Jacob's God; your God and mine too. Trust him to be at work in your life no matter what you've done or where we've been. He comes and stays by sheer grace; at work with and in you and me, through his promises, whether we feel his presence or his absence. Jacob. Not perfect. But radically changed.

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