

This is our third week working of the Narrative Lectionary, where we start in Genesis, the first book in the Bible, in September and end in May with Revelation the last book of the Bible so that in nine months we read the entire story of God's interaction with God's people from the Bible. I'd like to take a 10,000 foot look at the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament and then zoom in to the book of Genesis, finally looking at Jacob's story that we just read.

First, the 10,000 foot view of God's people's history prior to Jesus. In Genesis, there is the prehistory (creation, flood, tower of Babel) and three stories (1800—1500 BCE): Abraham and Sarah story, Jacob, Leah and Rachael's story and Joseph's story. Genesis ends with God's people in Egypt and God's people stay there for about 400 years. In the book of Exodus God's people leave Egypt, wander in the wilderness and in the books of Joshua and Judges they move into the promise land. During the period of the Judges, the Israelites are in the promise land and are separate tribes. A Judge is a charismatic leader that leads one of the tribes in battle often with the Philistines. The Philistines give their name to the land, which becomes to be known as Palestine.

The Philistines are united and have Iron Age weapons. The Israelites are mostly separate tribes fighting with Bronze Age weapons. So in about 1000 BCE the tribes unite with a common king, Saul, David, Solomon. Solomon taxes the people so heavily that the kingdom divides, North and South. In 722 the north is conquered by Assyria and never heard from again. In 586 BCE Judah, the Southern Kingdom, is sacked by Babylonians and the people are taken off to Babylon and they like life in Babylon so much that 50 years later when Persians conquer Babylon many Jews don't return to Jerusalem. Next

Alexander the Great happens and Greeks enter the holy land. After Alexander dies, the Holy Land is kind of overlooked by Greek rulers and two Jewish groups the Maccabees and Hasmoneans rule until Rome comes.

Now we'll zoom into the 1000 foot level. Jacob is the son of Rebecca and Isaac, the grandson of Abraham and Sarah. When Jacob is still in Rebecca's womb God tells her that the older son will serve the younger. Jacob's name literally means cheat or trickster and his brother, Esau's name, means hairy. The trickster puts on the hair of a goat to become hairy like his brother. Jacob tricks his father and cheats his brother out of his inheritance. Esau finds out and is going to kill Jacob. Jacob runs away back to Rebecca's family up in present day Turkey. As he is running away Jacob has his first of four encounters with God—this dream at Beth-el where God promises to bless him. Jacob spends 20 years with his uncle Laban, he marries and does well for himself. God calls him back to the land God promised him, where Esau is. On the way back, again at Beth-el, God encounters Jacob, they wrestle, and God gives Jacob the name Israel—literally meaning, wrestles with God. When Jacob gets to Esau he is expecting Esau to continue to try to kill him but Esau welcomes Jacob with open arms and Jacob says, "Seeing you is like seeing the face of God."

And now the 100 foot level or maybe the 10 foot level. Jacob is true to his name- he cheats his brother and ends up running for his life at the end of the day he has nothing, falling asleep with a rock for a pillow. What is Jacob feeling? Guilt or shame? Guilt is I did bad. Shame is I am bad.

Jacob says, "Surely God is in this place and I did not know it." What if Jacob was talking about more than the physical

location, Beth-el, and saying, “God is in my suffering.” Jacob brought this suffering on himself, he had nothing but a rock to sleep on, and God shows up and blesses Jacob. God is at work providing a blessing to all the people of the earth through this family and then the promise is stolen. God fulfills God’s promises even when we are unworthy. It is while we are still sinners that Jesus comes to us with grace, life and salvation.

So often when we think of sin we think of all we have done wrong. Yelled at a child, took a short cut on a project at work to get home early or didn’t feel guilty for not getting home. Guilt, because we have sinned, can be a really healthy thing. It pushes us to do better, to be better. Shame, believing that we are bad, is generally unhealthy. Shame leaves us feeling we are unworthy of love and connection. Shame feels like guilt but it is different. In order to feel shame we don’t have to have broken a moral value we just need to make a mistake showing we are imperfect. Maybe I get angry with my wife and then feel shame because as a child I learned “good” people don’t get angry. With shame, we feel like a bad person being imperfect. This is sin too and Jesus loves sinners. Jesus love comes to us when we over value ourselves and put our wants and needs before others. And Jesus love comes to us when we undervalue ourselves letting people walk all over us. God believes you are worthy of love and respect. That is where God met Jacob, in the midst of his guilt and shame, God shows up in an ordinary place with faithfulness, “I am with you now, here, and where ever you go. My promise will not leave you.”

What does the Jacob story tell us? That we are Jacob. Family dysfunction—control, deception, covering up—happened then and happens now. Jacob is fleeing guilt and shame, yet God’s promise comes saying, “I don’t want to let the old ways of

acting to determine your future. There is a new way.” There is more than one way, Jacob is heading away, but that there will be a coming back. The past will not determine the future.

When Jacob comes back and after wrestling with God, Jacob and Esau meet and Jacob says to Esau, “Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God.” Healing of the relationship is like seeing God and encountering grace. Jesus says, “You will see angles ascending and descending on the Son of God.” In the face of human dysfunction, Jesus is binding heaven and earth together, bringing healing, grace, love and salvation—freeing us from our past, from the dysfunction, to live happy healthy lives for ourselves and others. We to are blessed to be a blessing. Amen.