

A Future for Us

September 19, 2021 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC

Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

Genesis 18:10-17, 20-22 Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the LORD stood beside him and said, “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to 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^[c] in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep 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.” Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” ... Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.”

When I was in elementary school, I loved to play jacks. Do you remember jacks? They are those little star-shaped metal pieces that you pick up in a certain order while bouncing a little rubber ball. Though I loved to play jacks with my friends at school, I hated to play with my sister Pam, because she cheated. She would make up new rules as she went along. Whenever she tossed the jacks for her turn, she would see whatever the problem was that would make this round difficult for her, and she would simply announce a new rule that would let her win, like extra bounces of the ball, or getting to move jacks apart before she started picking them up. I didn’t get to make new rules, however.

Pam was 15 months younger than me, and looking back, I can imagine how difficult it was for her to follow along behind me, never quite ready to do the things I could do, like ride a bike or go to school. I suspect that, as far as she was concerned, making up new rules just evened the playing field for her, and maybe she was right about that.

As adults, Pam and I became really good friends. She was a social worker who dealt with the very hardest cases – abused children, sex offenders, mentally ill people on death row. I came to have great respect for her, and we even wrote a professional research article together, something we were both proud of. Pam and I talked on the phone for hours, shared confidences, and even thought of how we might one day live nearer to one another. She passed away several years ago, and I miss her dearly now. But when we were kids, Pam’s shenanigans were really hard to live with. And I always think of playing jacks with Pam whenever I read about Jacob, because Jacob was a cheater.

Last year, we spent many weeks hearing the stories of Abraham and his descendants. His son Isaac, his grandson Jacob, and his great-grandson Joseph were the main characters in those Bible stories. When Abraham was 75 years old, living in Haran, in present-day Syria, he and his 65-year-old wife Sarah were childless. God told them to pick up everything they had and move to the land that God promised them, in Canaan. In return for their faithful response to this call, God promised to make of their descendants a great nation, through whom the whole world would be blessed. God’s vision for their future must have seemed outlandish, given their ages, but Abraham and Sarah did as God commanded, and 25 years later, when Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90, their son Isaac was finally born.

You may remember that Isaac and his wife Rebecca were the parents of twin boys, Esau and Jacob. Esau was the older of the two, and Jacob famously cheated his older brother out of his birthright and his father’s blessing, so that he would inherit everything. It was a dysfunctional family, to say the least, and Jacob, whose name means “cheater,” had to run away back to Haran, Abraham’s ancestral homeland, to escape from Esau’s threats to kill him.

Jacob has never earned anything in his life, so far as we can tell from the scriptures, and here he is with a claim not only to his parents’ holdings but to leadership of the family going forward. That is, Jacob – not Esau – would supposedly become the one through whom God would build a great nation of Abraham’s descendants, descendants who would be as vast as the stars in the sky, through whom all the world would be blessed.

Jacob’s future, which he cheated to get, is supposed to be in Canaan, the land promised to Abraham so many years ago, and bequeathed to Jacob by his father Isaac, but here he is running away from Canaan to save his own neck. Jacob must wonder if God really means for him to have any future at all, let alone the glorious future promised to him as a son of Abraham.

On Jacob's flight toward safety in Haran, the time comes when he must rest. The sun has gone down. Jacob has to stop for this night. So, he lies down on the ground with a big rock under his head and has this dream. A ladder or stairway extends from earth to heaven, and angels are going up and down it. Suddenly, God appears right by Jacob. God doesn't come down the ladder, and Jacob isn't invited to come up the ladder. God doesn't send a message to Jacob by way of those angels. No, God is simply and immediately present with Jacob, speaking directly to him. "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to 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 your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land."

There it is: the Abrahamic promise extended to Jacob, by God's own voice. To Jacob, who must have been worried if he had a future at all, this is awesome news! So, he turns that big rock that had been his pillow into an altar to mark the spot, and he makes a vow to God in return: If you will do all the things that you have promised for me, then you shall be my God, and I will return one-tenth of all that I receive back to you as an offering.

You may remember from the stories we heard last fall, that Jacob goes on to Haran to find a wife. He remains a liar and a cheat and a thief, and he gets a taste of his own medicine when his father-in-law deceives him in return. Later, Jacob demonstrates appalling moral cowardice when he is returning to Canaan and meets up with his brother Esau at last. Jacob's character is not reformed at all by his meeting with God, so far as we can tell from scripture. Still, this is the person God has chosen to be the bearer of the Abrahamic promise for his generation. This is the person through whom the whole world is to be blessed!?!? Jacob is hard to like, and impossible to respect.

So, how are we to hear this story for our own lives? There is a general rule in reading Bible stories. If you identify with the good guys, you are not reading the story right. We have to think of ourselves as Jacob, with all his flaws. We may not be liars or cheats or thieves. We may not exhibit terrible moral cowardice. But none of us is perfect, and none of us can earn any of God's great gifts to us, no matter how hard we try. So, when we read Jacob's story, it would be wise for us to get down off our high horse, and be glad that God's promises are for imperfect, broken people like Jacob, or otherwise there would be no promises for us at all. I am preaching to myself here, too, as you might suspect. My sense of fairness in the world is still offended by all those games of jacks with my sister, so Jacob's story is one that leaves a bitter taste in my mouth every time I read it. I have to remind myself that this story is good news for all of us.

The good news is that God has a future for us, a surprising and undeserved future, no matter how old we are, as Abraham and Sarah were, or if we come from a totally dysfunctional family, as Jacob did. No matter how long it has been since we got anything right in our lives, we have a place in God's great story, and a call to be a blessing to the world. Even if it seems that we have no future at all, even if we don't think we have the character to pull it off, God is calling us to a great future, and we have an important role to play. And God has promised to be with us, as God was with Jacob, wherever we go. We don't need angels as intermediaries between us and God. God is right there beside us, every step of the way.

This story also reminds us that we have obligations to God in return – to stick with God, as God is sticking with us, and to invest ourselves – our time and our money – in the work to which we are called. Jacob promises that the Lord will be his God, and that he will give back one-tenth of all he receives as an offering to God.

Jacob's story applies to our church as well. Over the past couple of years, it has sometimes been hard to think beyond the immediate need in front of us. We spent so much energy just finding safe ways to worship together that it was really difficult to imagine further down the road. And now, at last, we have Sunday School rolling again, and we have a plan to move back indoors for worship next week, and – even though we are still in a terrible pandemic – we can just begin to glimpse a future that is fuller and brighter for this community of faith.

This scripture tells us that God never lost sight of that future, because God's relationship with us isn't from minute-to-minute or year-to-year but from generation-to-generation. And God needs us to be here and active and faithful so that God can bless our community and our world through us.

We know the work to which God calls us. Jesus charged us to care for the poor and feed the hungry and tend to the sick and welcome the stranger, in fact to see his own blessed face in the faces of those most in need. Throughout the Bible we read God's call again and again to bring justice to those who never, ever get a fair shake in this world. This is God's work, and it is ours as well.

God has a future for us, a surprising and undeserved future, in which we will be a blessing to this community and to the world. God calls us to ensure that everyone has a place at the table. And God will delight in the future with us when we are creators of justice, and joy, and compassion, and peace. Thanks be to God for this great gift!

Amen