

July 26, 2020 – Grace?

I just want to start by sharing that I'm recently back from some great time away. There was some time needed for study leave allowing me to reflect on spiritual issues, then bereavement leave and vacation time both in Ontario on the Ottawa River. My partner's family said their farewells to her father who passed away in February, and then released his ashes to the river in a small, socially distanced reception. The remainder of our time was joyful and rejuvenating, after being cooped up for so long with social distancing in a small house. We had free reign of a cottage to ourselves, right on the river bank, where we could jump in for a swim to cool off at any time during scorching temperatures.

The heat was repressive and overwhelming, but I was grateful for the time away to reconnect with my own family, enjoy some A/C at my parents periodically, and see my boys grow into young men as they helped build an epic treehouse. My daughter also became quite brave and skilled swimming in both the river and my sister's pool.

We were surrounded by the grace of God, allowing such an opportunity, such travel, to take place in the middle of a pandemic that has crippled the world. I have never seen airports so empty. I have never flown from Vancouver to Toronto and seen the airplane less than half full.

Security lines were so short, but every precaution was taken. Health was a priority, by the grace of God. And, might I add, by the grace of God, we had only one evening of rain the whole time we were there and no other setbacks. Glorious. We hope we were able to bring some of that great weather back here, as I heard you had lots of rain.

Now, I'm told last week you learned about Jacob's dream, and thin places. Today the story of Jacob continues, as does the journey through the book of Genesis, and the saga of the development of the lineage of Abraham. This text rests in the center of the promise for Abraham to be a nation, and is difficult to discuss in isolation from the past to which it is connected and the future it represents.

These verses are one of the key elements to the weaving of the future for the nation that is to come from Abraham. The weaving of this story comes in two ways to us. We begin to see the connection of elements of stories of the past as we read the text for this week. There is also the weaving--the winding or zigzag course--that is evident throughout as obstacles are encountered and surmounted.

Jacob is not the most upstanding citizen. His story to date has been steeped in greed, self-interest, scheming and cheating. Jacob is on the run

after cheating his brother out of his birth right and the blessing of their father Isaac. Jacob's scheming ways are the focus for James Newsome, who begins his commentary with: "The trickster tricked! Such a heading might be placed over this bitter-(for Jacob) sweet (for the reader) narrative.

Somewhere in the midst, we encounter God's grace, mercy and forgiveness that continue to be present even with Jacob, who strives to be more than "the least of these" by cheating his way through life repeatedly.

Today we might find it hard to see grace in the narrative. A theological dynamic is at work as well. God can bring good even out of betrayals, as God will do with Joseph and his brothers (see 50:20). From the unhappy but prolific union of Leah and Jacob, will come six of the twelve tribes of Israel, including the father of the royal line, Judah, and the father of the priestly line, Levi. I would also add that she bore the only daughter – Dinah (30:21).

There are challenges in finding God's presence and God's grace in the midst of a text where God is not explicitly named. While there are similarities in the well as a part of the Isaac and Jacob narratives, there are differences that are noted. Abraham's servant is sent to find a wife for Isaac, while Jacob goes on the quest for a wife by himself.

The narrator's emphasis cannot be missed: in his providence, the Lord provides a wife for Isaac. But where is the Lord in the wedding narrative of Jacob? He is not mentioned, not even once. The Lord seems to be absent. Jacob, the deceiver, seeks to fulfill the Lord's promise of numerous offspring with his own ingenuity and scheming. When Jacob comes to the well, he does not pray to the Lord for guidance but right away takes matters into his own hands.

What does it mean when the presence of God is not as obvious as angels going before? Do we have to offer fervent frequent prayers at all times to know that God is going to be with us in the choices we make?

Jacob may not be the most upstanding citizen but that is not to say that the presence of God is not with him throughout and even in the midst of his sometimes malfunctioned approach to making decisions. We are invited always to explore what it means to weave a future where God does not seem present in the choices we make, but where God somehow is made manifest and the promises of God are fulfilled.

Although the promises of God will prevail in the end, Jacob is not spared from the challenges and strife of life, at least some of which are of his own making. When, ultimately, the promises of God are shown to be

sure we understand that God has been with Jacob all along. Yet this text suggests that God is not standing by ready to rescue him from every twist of fate. It seems more a case for recognizing the presence of God in all our circumstances.

How do we sense God's presence? This is a great question to wrestle with all the time. Sometimes God's presence is in music. Or a phone call. Or in nature. Sometimes it's a simple prayer, or mantra. Sometimes it's what I refer to as a "serendipitous event" that just HAD to have God's handiwork at play. I think God's presence is at work in so many things we take for granted, and neglect to recognize. And one of those things is grace.

This is perhaps one of the many challenges in the text. We can judge Jacob, but there is something to be said about the presence of God with him, and how the presence of God with him is revealed. This presence is God's grace in the world.

To me, grace is wearing a mask for the sake of the other. Grace is seeing the other for themselves and not as a member of some particular group (as people make disparaging remarks about Asians and others). Grace is calling your friend or neighbour and checking in. Grace is asking

“how are you?”, and really wanting to know. (The “how are you” greeting started during one of the European plagues in England because people really needed to know). Grace is listening with compassion to the story of someone else’s suffering without conflating it with your own. The Black Lives Matter platform is an example of grace without negating it with an “All Lives Matter” pushback. Grace is about recognizing your own privilege and empathizing with the lack of privilege that others face daily. Grace is about mothers in Portland standing with their arms linked before armed police to protect protesters. Grace is knowing your limitations and seeking what you need to serve God and being given more than you needed and hoped for. Grace is a mustard seed growing up tall and strong, despite hard circumstances, yet surrounded by God. Grace is like yeast in the dough, a little given by God or given by us to others and creates big change.

I am reminded of a soul saved by grace centuries ago: John Newton. He was a man of great debauchery, ran slave ships and caused many problems, but he eventually had a change of heart – a moment of grace and redemption. Newton began to try his hand at writing hymns, which had become popular through the language made plain for common people to understand. Several prolific hymn writers were at their most productive in the 18th century, including Isaac Watts – whose hymns Newton had grown

up hearing – and Charles Wesley, with whom Newton was familiar.

Wesley's brother John, the eventual founder of the Methodist Church, had encouraged Newton to go into the clergy. And so were found the lyrics to “Amazing Grace”, written in late 1772 and probably used in a prayer meeting for the first time on January 1st, 1773. I prefer some alternate words offered in our hymn book – instead of “saved a wretch like me” we can sing “saved a soul like me”

In times such as these, we are reminded to stay kind, stay calm and stay safe, and we are given the opportunity of grace to love and serve others; to be in nature, to social distance with expanded bubbles. My trip back east allowed me to witness and experience several moments of grace that made for many memories and warmed hearts. There were still challenging moments, perhaps like Jacob faced, and poor choices made, but overall, grace prevailed and all was good, great in fact.

And so, we are likely reminded that almost everyone knows a Jacob, or sometimes we find ourselves like Jacob, and that even more so, reminded from time to time, the amazing grace and love bestowed by God (and hopefully by each one of us) upon the Jacob's in the world. Amen.