

Finding the Holy Amidst the Quotidian Realities of Family and Life

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Well once again this summer I'd like to return to our Genesis narrative, and more specifically to the part of the saga concerning Jacob. As I tried to articulate a couple of weeks ago, before Jacob was even born, he was a usurper. In utero he fought with his twin brother Esau as to who would enter the light first, and while he lost that particular battle, years later he tricked his brother out of that same birthright. But Jacob wasn't quite satisfied. Even when his old man Isaac was on his death bed, he donned a disguise and conned his father into giving his final blessing, not to Esau but to him. This apparently, however, was the last straw. Esau decided right then that as soon as the mandatory days of mourning for his father's death were over, he was going to take care of that conniving little heel of a brother once and for all.

Well the next thing you know, Jacob's mother and co-conspirator is sneaking him out of the house in the middle of the night telling him to head to Uncle Laban's place. By the way, you'd think that maybe, just maybe, Jacob had learned his lesson. But you'd think wrong. While Jacob is on the run in the wilderness he meets God at a place called Bethel, and even with the Almighty, Jacob is wheeling and dealing: You know God, IF you keep me alive, and IF you bring me back home safely in one piece, THEN and only then will I follow you. I guess some spots really are hard to change. What Jacob didn't know, however, was he was getting ready to meet his match in the trickery department.

So Jacob has fled his home and finally has reached the region where his Uncle Laban lived when he saw... her, the most beautiful woman in the world - Rachel. And even if she wasn't the most beautiful woman in the world, she was beautiful enough for Jacob to agree to 7 years of hard labor in the fields for the right to marry her. The text tells us "Jacob served 7 years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her." Sigh.

And so the the seven years came to an end and Jacob shows up at the synagogue to get hitched after which He rides off into the sunset with his new bride. Unfortunately, however, Jacob never looked under that veil because in the morning he found himself lying next to Leah, Rachel's older sister. Sorry Jacob my boy, Laban says, but traditions dictates that the older sister be married first. Tell you what though, because you're family, I'll throw Rachel into the deal, IF you sign this contract agreeing to work for me another 7 years. Now Leviticus 18:18 forbids a man from marrying sisters and with good reason I might add. But Jacob was so smitten with Rachel he signs on the dotted line. And so it came to be that the ultimate con man got conned.

And what about poor Leah? Talk about dysfunctional families. Leah is stuck married to a man obsessed with her sister thanks to her father's connivery and manipulation. And as the story continues we will discover that Leah's going to be able to get pregnant but not Rachel. So Leah will keep having kids in a desperate attempt to get Jacob to love her with just a fraction of the love he had for Rachel. Don't you know that that just did wonders for the sisters' relationship. And what do the kids learn from watching their moms and dad? Well it gets so bad that by the time they are all adults and by the time Rachel actually gets pregnant, Leah's kids are going to sell one of Rachel's kids into slavery, but only after seriously contemplating killing him. If this isn't a made for Jerry Springer story, I don't know what is.

When I was a marriage and family therapist I would see families weekly, or what was left of them. It is curious, is it not, that most of the serious damage in life isn't inflicted by strangers, but intentionally and unintentionally by family. How did Jacob get away with deceiving his father? Only with the help of his mother who was more than willing to deceive her husband. And yes, Jacob deceived Esau, but only because Rebekkah was willing to deceive her older son. I'd like to see you convince Esau that mom and dad don't have favorites. And while many families wrongly or right perceive the in-laws to be outlaws, Jacob's father not only cons him, but he grossly manipulates his two daughters. As for Jacob and Leah, while veils have somewhat fallen out of extended usage, isn't it true that the person we end up in bed with, isn't quite the same person we thought we were going to bed with?

It interests me that through this part of the narrative we never hear from God. We hear from God beforehand when Jacob is wheeling and dealing and we'll hear from God afterwards when Jacob is going head to head with an angel for 12 rounds. But here amidst 14 plus years of family chaos we don't hear a thing. So what are we to make of that? Well, I don't know what you expect when you encounter God: something holy, something glowing, something grand, something glorious. But those would appear to be the exceptions and not the rule. From the Biblical narrative it would seem that God is most present amidst family dysfunction and the quotidian realities of our day.

Next week I'll be at John's River Valley Camp and if you think there's something holy and mystical about church summer camp, and the children who go there then chances are you've never been to church summer camp. I'll pick at least 2 dozen ticks off the kids before the week is over. The staff will hold hands with at least six homesick kids. We will yell, cajole, plead, beg, scream, beseech, threaten and bribe the kids to clean the bathhouse and their bunk areas. But they will not listen and by week's end we will discover varieties of mold and mildew that scientists have never even imagined. We will skip stones and we will swim in mountain water and give thanks that it feels like it's about 50 degrees. When we're not in the water we will sweat and we will eat and we will spit watermelon seeds at each other. We will do goofy motions while singing goofy songs. We will make crafts. We will encounter people - kids and adults - we instantly love and those who drive us crazy from the get-go. We will make a campfire and eat s'mores. We will listen to the rain. We will stand in the rain and never worry once getting wet. At least one kid will run from a snake screaming even as at least one kid runs to it. A good chunk of the kids will see more stars than they have ever imagined. And throughout it all we will talk about the Spirit of God.

So will the Spirit of God speak? Where will God be? This is what I believe. I believe that God will be present in the tick-picking, in the cajoling, in the cleaning, in the skipping stones, in the mountain water, in the watermelon seed-spitting, in the sweating, in the eating, in the crafts, in those we love, in those who drive us crazy, in the s'mores, in the snakes, in the screaming, in the laughter, in the rain, in the fire, in the stars... yea... even in ourselves. Heaven is not up there. I heard once that the idea of a heaven up there was invented by travel agents with tickets to sell. Amen. We can participate in heaven, right now and right here. Likewise the kingdom of God is not simply that which will be, it is that which already is. It is as omnipresent and as profound as a seed. It is as mysterious and yet as predictable as bread rising. It can be found in a field by a farmer. Fisherman can catch it even if they catch nothing. Neither in the Genesis narrative, nor in this John's River narrative have I explicitly mentioned a booming and divine voice of God. Neither in the waters by ancient Galilee nor in the waters of the John's River will you see some kind of burning bush or flaming divine presence. And yet... there is God.

Do you not see God? Perhaps you are looking for God in the perfect family. If so, good luck finding one. Perhaps you are looking for God amidst something huge and self-evidently grandiose. Perhaps you are looking for God amidst a temple or a church. But when Jesus is teaching, he doesn't mention temples or the grandiose. He tells us about that which is small; like seeds. And he says the divine is like yeast and that a little can make a lot. He directs us to that which is hidden precisely by the closeness of its proximity and the quotidian aspects of its reality.

It's there folks. And if it's there, then that means it's here folks. If God was working then through families like Abraham's then that means God's working today through families like ours. If God could be found then amidst the poorest of the poor, in the most rural part of an insignificant occupied country, then that means Jesus can still be found in Reidsville and Kernersville and High Point. If, the kingdom of God was right in front of the faces of those ancient listeners, why would it be any different from us. Here amidst the Jacobs; here amidst our families; here amidst seeds and fishing and planting and working and living, God is. So let me finish with the words of Elizabeth Browning: Earth is crammed with heaven and every common bush is afire with God, but only she who sees will take off her shoes." God help us to see. And help us to take off our shoes, even here, even now. Amen.