

biblestudy: november 2018

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

November 4, 2018 Text: Genesis 25:19-34 “A Troubled Birth”

The Bible is supposed to contain good news. What’s the good news in this week’s study text? Is it good news that Rebekah seemed unable to get pregnant (Genesis 25:21)? Is it good news that when Rebekah did finally become pregnant the two boys in her womb moved around so much as to make Rebekah totally miserable (Genesis 25:22)? Is it good news that Rebekah had twins who were totally unlike each other (Genesis 25:24-27)? Is it good news that one of the boys, Jacob, took advantage of his desperate bother, Esau (Genesis 25:30-33)? Is it good news that Esau had no respect for his heritage (Genesis 25:34)?

Hmmm. This depressing set of events is precisely what God uses to move ahead the story of the deliverance of God’s people. Here’s good news: Life does not have to unfold in perfect ways in order for God to move in our midst. God can take our limitations, our brokenness, our irregularities and use them for God’s purposes. God is the good news!

In strange ways, God is able to use both Esau (the outdoorsman) and Jacob (the indoorsman) in this unfolding account. Often, we are tempted to think that God can use only certain kinds of people for God’s work. Here are two polar opposites, but if either moved out of character this story would not be the same. One was a “daddy’s boy” (Genesis 25:28) and one was a “mama’s boy” (Genesis 25:28). The truth of the matter is that at this point neither one of them looks much like a prized

package! Perhaps I can listen to this and hear God saying, “Don’t write off any of my children.”

It helps, of course, that we are able to get the long view and see that ultimately God takes us as we are and does good things. We stand well past these events and are able to look back to see God use “a troubled birth” to save God’s people. After all, we are an Easter people who can look at life through the lens of an empty tomb.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In her memoir (*Can’t Nothing Bring Me Down*, Zondervan), Ida Keeling—still running in track meets at 102 years old—has written “Every night, I thank God for my many blessings, for his guidance, for his protection. And every night he tells me, ‘Miss Ida, you just keep on, because I ain’t done with you yet.’...Without God to guide me during my darkest days, I don’t know what would have become of me...No despair or moment of wondering could last or triumph over the words God spoke in Hebrews 13:5 when the Creator of the Universe promised, “I will never leave you or forsake you.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Eternal and ever-present God, You have with such grace moved among Your people that I find hope for even my days of failure and emptiness....”

November 11, 2018 Text: Genesis 27:5-10, 18-19, 21-29 “Jacob Receives Isaac’s Blessing”

Life is not always simple: black or white. Sometimes it is gray. Consider this week’s Bible story. On the one hand, Rachel and Jacob seem to be conniving to get their way, tricking poor old Isaac (Genesis 27:5-17). Give them credit: trying to hide Jacob’s smooth skin with rough goat hair; now that was clever. Clever, yes, but still cheating and lying. It’s hard to see what is good about that.

Or, think of it this way. Rachel lived in a society in which women had no privilege or right to property, so women had no influence. Jacob, the younger son, was doomed to a life of dependence because only the oldest son had any power of inheritance. What Rachel and Jacob did was to challenge and defeat a corrupt and unfair system. Their work was not a matter of cheating; it was a work of justice.

So, which is it? Was this cheating or was this justice? Or...maybe gray.

Do you remember this classic moral dilemma from World War II? If a German Christian was hiding a Jewish friend from the pursuit of the Nazis, was it immoral to lie about it? Suppose the Christian is moving his Jewish neighbor from one hiding place to another, using a cart with hay packed all around the escaping Jew. They are stopped by the police: “What have you got there? Are you hiding anything?” “No,” comes the answer. “This is just hay.”

That is an out and out lie, but was it the appropriate moral answer?

It is, of course, easy to fool ourselves into thinking that we can justify our behavior, our decisions. In this unfolding Jacob-Esau story, the writer of Genesis has included a clue as to God’s understanding of what is going on. Look again at Genesis 25:23. “...the older will serve the younger.” [Esau will serve Jacob; Esau’s tribe (Edomites) will serve Jacob’s tribe (Israelites). 2 Samuel 8:13-14 says that is what happened.] Is Genesis 25:23 God’s stated will or is this simply God’s prediction?

For me, the bottom line leaves me with some uncertainty. At minimum, that is a caution when I judge the actions of others without fully grasping their motivation or intention. Then, there is the care with which I must look at my own motives. Moral decisions are not always easy.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Episcopal, Questions Episcopal Answers* (Morehouse), Ian Markham and C. K. Robertson wrote, “...ethics is a matter of discovery, not invention. We are seeking to discover what God really wants.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Walk with me, Lord...”

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November 18, 2018 Text: Genesis 28:10-22 “Jacob Forms a Relationship with God”

Do you want an inspiration from God? Try sleeping with your head on a rock (Genesis 28:11). I doubt that is the chief message of these verses from Genesis!

More likely, the key ingredient of this account is what those in the Wesleyan tradition call “prevenient grace.” This is an understanding that God makes the first move. This is an understanding of what some call “God’s preparatory work.” This is the grace from God that precedes our response of faith. And that is what is happening in this text.

God’s prevenient grace shows up in unexpected places. One implication of prevenient grace is that even non-believers can do acts of kindness or caring. God’s grace is active even if it is not named or claimed. In this week’s text, Jacob was not even looking for a word from God when this dream burst upon him with new, life-giving insight (Genesis 28:12).

When Jacob woke up he was afraid (NIV, NRSV), terrified (CEB). Is that a feeling that we seek? Perhaps we are too much at ease with God’s presence. The important thing to note here is that once Jacob recognized that God’s grace and promise was real, Jacob committed himself to respond in faith and trust (Genesis 28:20-22).

This morning (I’m writing this in late March), I read the obituary of a man whose memorial service will be at Bethany, the congregation of

which I am a part. I noticed that the newspaper had the street address wrong for the fellowship center where the service will be held. Now I have visions of someone (perhaps me?) standing at the incorrect address to give directions to the correct address. It dawns on me that sometimes that is the way God works: we are called to be the one who helps someone find the right relationship with God. God’s grace often comes packaged as a human being. For Jacob, God’s prevenient grace came in a dream. For someone else, perhaps God’s prevenient grace comes through me or you.

It’s worth a thought.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Tokens of Trust* (Westminster John Knox), Rowan Williams has written: “God’s action is going on, a sort of white heat at the center of everything. It means that each one of us is already in a relationship with God before we’ve ever thought about it. It means that every object or person we encounter is in a relationship with God before they’re in a relationship of any kind with us. And if that doesn’t make us approach the world and other people with reverence and amazement, I don’t know what will.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Here. Now. You, loving God...”

November 25, 2018 Text: Genesis 30:22-32, 43 “God Blesses Jacob and Rachel”

Although Genesis 30:23-42 is not included in the printed text, take time to read it. Those verses are filled with scheming, promises, borderline lies and borderline truth, and even a good dose of animal husbandry. Mercy! One wonders how God could work God’s purposes when these characters dealt God such a treacherous hand!

So, here is an account of God’s using less than perfect people to accomplish God’s movement among God’s people. At minimum, that is encouraging to me when I look in the mirror and see one of God’s less than perfect people.

I don’t think Jacob is what we have in mind when we speak of a biblical understanding of marriage. He had four wives at the same time: Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah (Genesis 29:26, Genesis 29:28, Genesis 30:3, Genesis 30:9). I don’t think Jacob is what we have in mind when we speak of biblical ethics: cheating Esau, cheating Laban (Genesis 25:30, Genesis 30:42). I don’t think Jacob is what we have in mind when we speak of biblical relationships: robbing Laban, getting revenge against Laban, sneaking away (Genesis 31:1, Genesis 31:6, Genesis 31:20).

So, here is an account of God’s using less than perfect people to accomplish God’s movement among God’s people. At minimum, that

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In spite of all these shenanigans, the story now includes the heroic Joseph (Genesis 30:24); the story now points toward the Canaan, “that good and happy land” (Genesis 31:18); the account will move ahead to reconciliation between Esau and Jacob (Genesis 33:10, 12).

So, here is an account of God’s using less than perfect people to accomplish God’s movement among God’s people. At minimum, that is encouraging to me when I look in the mirror and see one of God’s less than perfect people.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Wolfhart Pannenberg (*Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, The Westminster Press) wrote: “Human beings are indeed destined for a social life, and only in society can they live in a way that accords with their destiny...The only organization of common life in which the destiny of individuals can be fully realized is the kingdom of God, which no political (activity) by human rule can possibly bring about.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee...”



“Not what we say about our blessings, but how we use them, is the true measure of our thanksgiving.”
W. T. Purkiser