

6.2.24

Sermon: Middle of Nowhere

Sermon Series: Stories Around the Campfire

God's Word: Psalm 146

How many of you like shows like Survivor, Alone, or any type of wilderness competition? Ever since we've got together Pamm and I are big Survivor fans and recently with the help of one of my friends, I've gotten into the show Alone. Both shows pit contestants together in a game of survival in the middle of nowhere, whether in the Canadian wilderness or on an island in Fiji. These contestants willingly go to these places for various reasons with limited resources and the goal is to be the last one standing in the end. Survivor puts you in a group whereas Alone, is just that, the person alone in the wild. Too often with the limited food and sleep all while expending lots of energy to stay alive, the people in these shows have their minds play tricks on them, often hallucinating or aren't thinking clearly. Yet, in both shows the producers often highlight the motivation of the contestants and by the end of the show that motivation often changes and has a deeper impact on them with their experience in these survival situations.

Jacobs in a survival situation here, alone. Yet his motivation is much different as he's stolen his brother Esau's birthright and blessing, aided by his mom. He's running for his life, alone, all while retracing the steps of his ancestor Abraham's tracks to Haran in Mesopotamia. We talked last week about the Israelites that were caught between a rock and a hard place at the Red Sea this is another one of those pivotal moments in the history of Israel, yet this time for Jacob. We're turning back the clock a bit today. Yet, I think as shared last week that we can learn from what Jacob experiences as we journey together to the place where God wants us to be as individuals, a people, and a church.

Jacob is so exhausted and tired he is finally settling down in what I picture is a hiding spot where he can finally rest. He's hot and sweaty, heart still racing, and just wants a few minutes of peace so his body can recover. Maybe you're feeling that way now, you're running from something or trying to hide from someone or something, something in your past? You're looking for a little time of respite. This is where Jacob is, so much so that he's got a rock for a pillow. I'm not sure I'll ever be that tired, but maybe that's a soft rock. And so tired, Jacob, drifts off to sleep.

Here, Jacob has a crazy dream. Of a stairway to heaven that reaches all the way to heaven with angels going up and down to and from earth. We often picture it like a ladder, but it was more "a ramp-like structure that served as a divine sanctuary through which heaven and earth were connected. This stairway to heaven does not give Jacob access to heaven; rather, God speaks to Jacob where he is, denoting God's immanent presence rather than a faraway removed God calling from a distance."

God initiates this encounter with Jacob. We wouldn't expect that God would be on the side of swindler like Jacob, but Jacob's past doesn't matter here. Even as he's running from the consequences from his actions, God meets Jacob in the middle of nowhere. Jacob was at his most broken, humbled, and vulnerable state and God meets him there. "At exactly this point of limbo, landless, rootless and with no real prospects for the future, God meets Jacob at a place of no particular significance... this surprise encounter completely comes from God..."

God speaks to Jacob in this dream and "God reiterates the promises that God has made to Jacob's ancestors, Abraham and Isaac. With this gesture, God emphasizes that God is not only the God of the first and the second generation. Rather at the point at which Jacob is most vulnerable, God asserts that God is also the God of Jacob." Its interesting that Jacob here is taking the journey of Abraham in reverse, retracing his ancestral steps. Remember God told Abraham to leave the comforts of his homeland to a place where God would show him. It was in the promised land God spoke to Abraham and told him that his ancestors would live in the land, a promise that was also repeated to Isaac, Jacob's father. But here Jacob is fleeing from that land to Abraham's original land, running from the promised land when God speaks to Jacob, reiterating the promise that God will use Jacob to be a blessing to others.

What an amazing message for us. That no matter what our past may be, God is faithful to his promises. That even at our most vulnerable and sometimes at our lowest moments God meets us and reminds us of his promises. That even in the face of our own self-serving self-aggrandizement all the while running from the consequences of those actions God can still use us to be a blessing to others. This undeserved grace is what God gives to Jacob and gives us time and time again.

At the same time God promises Jacob that God will be with him. Jacob in amid an unknown land, an uncertain future, and doesn't know where or what to do next. God is continuing his promise as he has throughout Jacob's family's history to be there and to protect Jacob and his family. And even further, God promises to bring Jacob back home, a promise that is repeated over and again in the Old Testament for Jacob's family who become Israel. Think about after the fall of Adam and Eve, the exile of the Israelites from their land, God's promise here extends from there to those who were displaced to Egypt, the promise that Israelites forgot before crossing the Red Sea, not to mention the later history of being exiled from their homeland and living in Babylonian captivity. And the story even extends beyond to when Jesus brings us back home to be in right relationship with God. God promises to never leave us or forsake us and is coming back to bring us home in the end.

"When Jacob awoke from his dream, not only the place has been changed by God's presence, but also, he is a changed man. Professing God's presence in this rather ordinary place, Jacob builds an altar, converting his "pillow" — just another stone from that place — into a type of memorial stela that marks the life-altering encounter with God. He calls this

place without a name “Bethel” — house of God, professing that God is here, on the way right there where Jacob finds himself.” Jacob now has a newfound confidence to go forward into the unknown (Yes, a Frozen reference). This confidence is only born out of this encounter that God initiated.

Notice in this whole passage of Scripture, of Jacob’s fleeing his consequences of his own acts against his dad and brother, God does not have a word of judgement about the situation. No, God continues to give Jacob unconditional grace and continues to give promise after promise. What does that say for us that are called to live a life patterned after our God? Where are we supposed to offer unconditional grace and mercy, even our presence amid other’s anxious, chaotic, and hectic lives? How can we bring God’s presence into these spaces and places?

“In this grace-filled encounter, we see how God can transform an ordinary stone and an ordinary place into something special; a place where God’s presence has made a home in the world. Similarly, this trickster who has deceived his father and brother, and who since birth has lived in strife with the people around him can be transformed by God into a richly blessed man who serves as a source of God’s blessing to others.”

No matter where you are at in life, we as the United Methodist Church, believe that God is relentlessly pursuing us, wanting us to know that God loves us, and sent his Son for us. This campfire story reminds us that amid the world of terror, fear, and loneliness that there is an alternate reality in which God’s presence can transform us. Wherever we may be, in the middle of nowhere, in our homes, in our church, in our community God’s promise is that he will continue to be with us on this journey. That normal places, chaotic moments, alone moments are where often God shows up and transforms us and others. May we be willing to recognize those moments and places, like Jacob, and live differently when that happens, so that we can become a channel of God’s blessings to others.
Amen.