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Gen...: 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

Ps.: even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

Matt: Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'

## God is Here?! With Me?!

Our study of Genesis brings us to another beginning story, Jacob on the mountain, discovering, much to his surprise, that God is there with him.

He is fleeing his brother's sworn oath to kill him.

His mother and father send him away for his sake and theirs—his father will soon die: Jacob will not be there to bury him.

He will never see his beloved mother again.

He is there on the mountain because he is a cheat and a scoundrel, as a consequence of his misdeeds... Because of what my own momma was talking about said, "be sure your sins will find you out." Not sure why she said that to *ME* all the time....

This is not a planned journey. He has no provisions, no companions.

Sunset falls.

He looks for high ground intending at sunrise to see whether he is being followed, before he continues his flight. But in the night, he sees a stairway connecting heaven and earth, with heavenly beings ascending and descending. God speaks to him, assuring him that the promises made to his ancestors belong to him as well, that in time he will return home.

It is a moment, a story, illustrating the parable Jesus tells of weeds growing in the wheat, a parable told to help us see that judgment belongs to God, not to us

We are not to go out weeding in the name of God. Jacob is a weed, after all, a scoundrel and a rascal. Esau wants to pull him up by the roots, and with good reason.

This is the story that puts him on the mountain:

His father Isaac is old and dying, too blind to distinguish one son from the other. He calls for Esau, sends him out to hunt game, cook it, and bring it to him. Isaac's dying wish is to eat one last meal with Esau to give him his final blessing.

But Rebekah overhears this conversation, calls Jacob, and sends him out to get choice kids from the flock. She prepares Isaac's favorite meal, dresses Jacob in Esau's clothes and puts the skins of the kids on his arms, so he feels as hairy as Esau to her blind and failing husband..

When Jacob goes into Isaac, Isaac smells him, feels his clothes, he believes Jacob is Esau, and so gives Esau's blessing to Jacob.

This is why he sleeps on a stone pillow on a mountaintop. He has burned all of his bridges and cannot go back and undo what he has done. No one trusts him, they all know he is a cheater; there is nothing he can say or do to undo or fix the trouble he has made...

If I were Jacob on the mountain, I would be doubting myself, feeling deep regret, second-guessing my decisions, blaming my mother for continually pushing me to stick up for myself, pushing me forward, pulling strings....talking about some old prophecy, using that get me into all sorts of trouble...into THIS trouble....

I would be thinking about how this family pattern was in play from day one, all the mess and conflict between my mother and father—there from the start and all that needed to happen was for my father, saint Isaac, to treat me and Esau the same and give up all this nonsense about the eldest son.

And then there was Esau, wooden-headed brute, he could have spoken up for me, shown a bit of concern for me, told my mom to lay off and my dad to see us as twins and equals, but noooo. Not Esau....

Looking back would be sickening enough; and looking forward?

What will Jacob's reputation be when he gets to where he is going, to his mother's family who have no doubt heard about him, a younger son who tricks his blind, dying father, tricks gentle old ISAAC, the promised son of Abraham, for God's sake!

Gosh, if I were Jacob on the mountain? I would be imagining how people would look at me, what they were saying about me, whether I could ever live this down.... And go to them looking for a wife, expect them to trust me with a sister or daughter?

If it were me? I would be crying out to God, asking for forgiveness, praying for a miracle.

Protect me from Esau, please God! Bless my dear father and mother? Make a way for me when the sun rises...If you get me out of this God I will never cheat again?

Wouldn't you be praying your heart out? Making promises and looking for divine deal?

No, none of that. Jacob has no thought of God, offers no prayers at all, makes no sacrifices....

He just....goes.....to .....sleep.

Odd, no?

Okay, a brief aside for modern people:

Our modern understanding of dreaming does not fit this story. Jacob's dream is not the result of a psychological state as we understand it today, of working out stress and anxiety or of subconscious fears. No, dreaming in scripture is a form of divine communication. God revealed Godself to Jacob. Jacob is not tortured in his sleep, the ladder is a way his subconscious deals with all the trouble he has caused.

No, none of that. Jacob's ladder is not a resolution of psychic trauma but God speaking to him.

So then, back to the question, why does he make no prayers, no sacrifices, why is he not thinking of God at all as we know we would all do if we found ourselves in the same position, why in fact does wake up surprised to find God was there...

Jacob knows nothing of God, nothing *himself* of God. He knows of the God of his father Isaac, and of Abraham, that God made promises to *them* and took care of *them* in a way that does not fit his experience, not at all.

He is not like Abraham desperate for a child, for a future...Not like Isaac, the blessed "only" son, loved by both his mother and father, who follows in his father's footsteps without question and with little difficulty.

No, the God of Abraham and Isaac belongs to home, to the past, to others, not here, not to him, not to this moment, not to the future...

He does not pray to God, makes no sacrifices, because he does not yet know God is with him too, is for him too.

We might well think of this in modern terms.

The quaint God of the last generation, you know, when everyone got along pretty well and things worked out and life wasn't so busy a time now passed when there weren't all these conflicts and divisions...something of an antique God, you know, of another era, not relevant to this moment.

If we could go back to *that* God, to *that* time.....

Jacob has no thought of God because he does not yet know, nor does he expect, the God of his ancestors is also his God, speaks to him like he spoke to his forefathers....

He does not pray because the quaint God of his fathers seems irrelevant to the predicament he finds himself in,

But the dream on the mountain changes all of this.

Jacob reaches that place familiar to many of us: he knows he can't go back and fix things, that he can only go forward when the sun rises, unsure of what lies ahead.

I was looking over my notes from three years ago, from the last time we read the story of Jacob's ladder together....Well, *this* is the first time we read it together; three years ago, I read it to an iPad, with the sanctuary as empty as a mountain top.

What God says to Jacob was a comfort to us then, as I hope it will be today.

God says

"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.

And after Jacob gets over his surprise, he names the place Beth El—House of God, and says he has discovered a gate to heaven.

And then he piles up some stones to mark that place, and puts oil on it to signify its sacredness, its healing power, because he believes he will come back that way again,

and he walks into the sunrise and into an unknown future with confidence that God walks with him.

And so may we all walk my friends, and so may we all walk.