

FED AND BLESSED, FEED AND BLESS
GENESIS 32: 22-33 AND MATTHEW 14: 13-21
EASTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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When are we too grown up to need God? Does it happen when we gain some independence with a driver's license? When we graduate from high school? College? When we get our first paycheck? Marry? Retire? Just when is our relationship with God supposed to be settled so that we have the answers to our questions and know the rules to life? At what point does life become about smooth sailing instead of weathering the rough seas?

To think that God stops all the chaos in our lives when we believe ourselves finally "all grown up, mentally or spiritually," is a comforting thought, but not one backed by Scripture. We know that much of God's work takes place in total upheaval with people who are scared, confused, wrestling with jealousy, or overcome by greed. So it is with Jacob. In the chaos called life, he finds himself separated from family; and, the same struggles, questions, confusion carried by Jacob are just as real for us today.

Regardless of age, we seem to long for a relationship with a God who will protect us, provide for us, and who will fit into our "human" world. We want life to be comfortable, uncomplicated. Life's surprises, especially when they mess up our master plan, our bucket list, our to-do tasks are not welcome signs. But, as people of faith, we are called to trust, stubbornly trust...that a new descriptor we heard in Sunday School last week...stubbornly trust... that God works in God's time and that God works in the confusion, chaos, turmoil and troubles of life. However, if we are honest, that attitude is easier to profess, than to live.

This certainly seems to be the mode of operation with Jacob, a young man who has some growing up of his own to do.

Some background for our story this morning. When Jacob and Esau, twin brothers—who are anything but identical—were young they had a parting of the ways because of Jacob's greed. As the oldest boy, by minutes, Esau was supposed to receive his father's inheritance, as well as his father's blessing. When Jacob fools his father with trickery and earns both the bucks and the blessing, Esau is furious! When Esau threatens to kill his brother, Jacob high-tails it out of town. He knows he has done wrong and so does God.

About 20 years of silence pass between the brothers—unaware of how each is growing and growing up. Jacob lives out a few more shady, questionable acts,

like cheating his father-in-law out of his best goats and trying to leave secretly in the middle of the night with his wives and children, bargaining with God and promising to worship God alone. Of course, all of this in exchange for a few things going his way. But, as seems typical of Jacob, the promise fades as the routine of life takes over.

If we are honest with ourselves, have not we done the same? Bargained with God? Dear God, if you will be with me through this mess, I will always, and you fill in the rest of the sentence...go to church, read the Bible, pray, trust. Or perhaps it goes something like this: I will never...what? Lie again? Hurt someone else's feelings? Ask for anything else?

Good or bad, bargain or no bargain, Jacob's yearning for home never dies. So, he begins planning his trip back to his birthplace. On his way home-to the twin who wants to kill him-Jacob and God meet again, by way of a dream. While sleeping at this campsite, Jacob dreams of wrestling with a man, a man he believes to be God, and what a wrestling match it is! Neither is backing down. After a long night of rolling, turning, twisting, the sun begins to rise and the man says to Jacob, "It is morning; let me go!" But even now, Jacob is not giving up and he demands a blessing before the match can end. Then, in what seems like a strange turn of events, the man asks for a name. "Jacob," that is my name. "No longer," says the man. "You are named Israel, meaning 'one who struggles with God.'" Right there at that spot, in that moment, in the middle of wrestling and questions and doubts and pleas, Jacob believes he has seen God face to face.

It is no coincidence that as Jacob is heading to meet his own brother, the one who wants him dead, Jacob sees the face of God who wants life for him and who will wrestle with him to the end, and still embrace him with a blessing. Oh, that Esau would do the same. And in one of the Bible's most poignant moments of grace, Esau and Jacob meet. With arms wide open, Esau embraces his brother and Jacob cries out, "After all I did to you and all these long years of silence, you still welcome me. In your face, Esau, brother of mine, "I see the face of God!" THAT is an "in your face" attitude we hope we all can experience!

When in your life have you wrestled with anger, bitterness, or doubt? Are you still struggling or, like Jacob, has someone come to you with a word of forgiveness, acceptance, open arms? Have you seen the face of God in someone else who has helped restore the promise of God's presence in your life?

Jacob comes home preparing for the worst and he gets a full-of-forgiveness, in your face attitude. The grace of God is bigger than any of our wrestling. God's

promise is not to bow to our conditions of peace or comfort, but rather to be with us through all the struggles of life. Right there, wrestling with us.

Any time, but especially in our time when it seems as if the bad just keep throwing punches at us, things like illness, death, financial worries, addictions, broken relationships, lost jobs, destroyed homes, and more come our way, do not let anyone convince you that God must be absent because life is not going well. Hang on to your belief in God, the way Jacob hung on in his wrestling match and received God's blessing, yet again.

Our merciful God has already made the covenant to hang on to you, to me, to us. That promise of a presence that will not let go, should cause us to mature in our faith, like Jacob, realizing that we all are never too grown up to need God. When we baptize infants and children, most likely they have not wrestled with much in life yet, but we know the temptations as they grow, also grow around them. We covenant with the parents of these children, promising to help them mature in their faith amid life's ups and downs. We promise that if there are times when the struggles overcome them, we will hold on to them with an in your face attitude, offering the love, grace, and forgiveness that our Lord has so graciously gifted us throughout our lives. There will be times when, because of faith struggles, those children—like the rest of us---will need to have our own souls feed like the hungry multitudes.

Leading up to this feeding, Jesus has been teaching, preaching, and healing. His feet have been doing some walking. Our gospel lesson is clear about the fact that people have been following Jesus for all kinds of reasons, but today, today the reason is hunger. Jesus knows they are hungry for something the world is not giving them. They are hungry for healing, for health, for compassion, for love, for forgiveness, hungry for a kind of saving for which they are not yet aware. Their feet took them to a holy hill. Jacob walked to a holy rock. All of them led in the exact directions where their spirits could be fed.

The hungry bellies of the mountainside crowd came later in the evening.

What to do, the disciples discussed. Two fish, five loaves of bread and five-thousand mouths to feed. A few can be fed, while the bellies of the others rumble. Not fair. So, their solution, send them home before more than just bellies were rumbling!

Into the midst of this quandary, steps Jesus, offering yet another blessing, another message of hope: "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

That is the heart of the message for both Jacob and the masses: when we encounter the Holy, we need never go away minus a spiritual blessing or empty soul. We are blessed and we are spirits are fed. God's blessing sustained Jacob as his feet took him home, to life-giving reconciliation. Jesus' gift of more-than-enough food sustained the crowds as their feet led them home with life-giving hope.

These two encounters with the Holy remind us how we, as disciples, order our steps, and take our spiritual feet, has an impact on us and those around us. Jesus assures us that God takes the little of our lives and blesses us beyond measure. Sometimes, we simply need to be hungry enough to stubbornly trust Jesus to take our feet to the place where we will see God face to face.

The Lord's Table is set with more than enough. Come. Be fed. Be blessed. Then, go feed and be God's blessing to all, a solitary soul asleep on a rock or masses gathered on mountains. And when we do, may we, all of us, see the face of our Lord in each other! Amen