

When Tom and I got married 15 years ago, there was one moment in the ceremony that I'll never forget, and it might not be the moment you'd think of. It was our processional. Our wedding party was small, consisting of only Brittany, Allison, Tom and me, so Tom escorted me down the aisle. I thought I was a very calm, cool, and collected bride, but at the moment Tom and I started down the long aisle and over 300 people stood and turned towards us, my knees went weak, the tears filled my eyes, and it was all I could do to maintain my composure. This physical and emotional reaction surprised me. It was an automatic response to a powerful and profound sense of being lovingly blessed by so many friends and family. These people knew us; they knew our past stories and struggles, and they were joyful and approving of all that this day meant to our family of four. I can't recall ever receiving a blessing in quite this way and with such intensity.

Today's biblical text is the story of another profound blessing. It is God's blessing of Jacob. In this story any assumptions we might hold that love or blessings are given only to people who are worthy of them are thrown out the window because Jacob receives God's blessing right after he's done some pretty mean things. Jacob has just been caught cheating his brother out of the family inheritance. Listen to how Frederick Buechner tells Jacob's story:

“It happened just after he'd ripped Esau off for the second time and was making his getaway into the hill country to the north. When sunset came and nobody seemed to be after him, he decided that it was safe to camp out for the night, and having left in too much of a hurry to take his bedroll with him, tucked a stone under his head for a pillow and prepared to go to sleep.

You might think that what happened next was that he lay there all night bug-eyed as a result of his guilty conscience or if he did finally manage to drop off, that he was tormented by conscience-stricken dreams, but neither of these was the case. Instead he dropped off like a baby in a cradle and dreamed the kind of dreams you would have thought were reserved for the high saints.

He dreamed that there was a stairway reaching up to heaven and that there were angels moving up and down it with golden sandals and rainbow-colored wings and that standing somewhere above it was God himself. And the words God spoke in the dream were not the chewing-out you might have expected but something altogether different.

God told him that the land he was lying on was to belong to him and his descendants and that someday his descendants would become a great nation and a great blessing to all the other nations on earth. And as if that wasn't enough, he then added a personal P.S. by saying, ‘Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.’”

When Jacob wakes up having received this blessing he says: “Surely, the Lord is in this place--and I did not know it!...This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” That nowhere land where the fugitive Jacob camps out one lonely night becomes for him the house of God, the gate of heaven.

This blessing Jacob received was a twofold promise. First, Jacob was promised land and that he would have many children and descendants. In the ancient world children were essential in order to survive. The land was empty. Tribes struggled just to keep ahead of the death rate. This makes God's promise of descendants as numerous as the dust to be an extravagant blessing

But then God adds this promise this: “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.” God promises Jacob companionship and protection. And with that blessing God offers Jacob a different future to that of a fugitive like he had been living. He doesn’t have to keep running away from life. Jacob receives a blessing, rather than the curse he might deserve.

This story is typical of Jacob’s life. It was always a struggle. Shortly after this special night, Jacob labors seven years for the woman he loves only to be tricked into working seven more. Then after marrying his beloved, Rachel, he journeys forth with his family to begin his own life and is stopped by his father-in-law and accused of stealing the family idols. In a rash protest he declares that if anyone has the stolen gods, he will be cursed. He didn’t know that it was his own beloved Rachel who had taken them and hid them. So when he finds this out, Jacob lives in fear that his very own curse of Rachel will be played out on his sons she bears, Joseph and Benjamin. But through out Jacob’s tumultuous life, God’s blessing and promise flows through this flawed human being.

Do you remember a day, a time, or a moment when you received a profound, unexpected, and perhaps even undeserved blessing that changed your life? Did your blessing come with an expectation that you would respond in some act of gratitude?

How often do you imagine Jacob returned in his memory to that primitive campground under the stars? Jacob’s life continued to have its struggles--big struggles--yet he could return in his memory to that night and that Holy place where the gate of heaven had been opened to him in his dreams and the presence and promise of God were palpably revealed.

Our memories have the power to keep dreams alive. I’m sure that those who followed Jesus thought back many times to the day Christ said to them: “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Christ’s followers were blessed to be a blessing in a troubled world. And so are we. And so we are! We may be small in number as a church, but since 1912 this place has given out blessings.

I feel we are at a pivotal time when we need to think big about our blessing and how to keep our blessing going into the future. One way to keep it going is to use the metaphor of this text in Genesis and to say to those we care about that this place is a house of God and invite them to be part of our welcoming community and share with us the joys and sorrows of life shared in communion with each other and with God.

Whatever the future holds for us individually or as a church here in this place, we can rest assured in the promise of Christ: “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”