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Wake up and Smell the Coffee!
Genesis 28:10-19a

Yesterday morning, twenty-four youth plus youth leaders left for the Montreat Conference Center near Ashville, North Carolina. As all of you know, Montreat is located in the North Carolina strain of the Appalachian Mountains. There is something about going to a beautiful spot that seems to enhance our spiritual side. And, there is something about the mountains, Appalachian or otherwise, that seems to make our senses more alert to creation, timing, and beauty.

Moses certainly understood that concept. He went up on Mount Horeb to encounter God and his developing destiny. He came into contact with a bush that appeared to be burning, but was not being consumed.

A few years later, he went up on Mount Sinai to again encounter God and plead with God about how he was to keep everyone acting civil as they slogged week after week, month after month, and year after year through the wilderness, looking for the agricultural setting God had promised. That led to Moses coming back down with a moral code of living we know as the Decalogue (or Ten Commandments), First Edition. When Moses came off the mountain back to the Hebrew people, they had used any golden jewelry available to make a visible idol—the golden calf—and were having an orgy. Hence for Moses, another mountain top trip, more questioning of his own leadership ability, more questioning of the worthiness of the Hebrew people, and finally the Ten Commandments, Second Edition.

Today's Old Testament lesson takes us back beyond the days of Moses and after the days of Abraham to one of our ancestors—Jacob. Jacob has often been viewed as less worthy than many of the other religious patriarchs, but I think not. He has been labeled a "rascal," and when set along aside the gospel lectionary reading for today about seeds and weeds, he could get an even weaker image. In some ways, we are all rascals...at times. We are all "weeds" in the

garden, at times. But Jacob was also an ambitious leader, the object of God's love, and a flower in the garden, so to speak.

The Bible is never about black and white—perfect versus imperfect. Remember that the biblical stories are there to teach us how to live. The Bible is not a science book, math book, or history book. It is not “divine,” as the Koran is accepted by its followers to be divine. Sometimes, we treat the Bible as divine, rather than as God's Word, which points us to the divine—God. There is a big difference, and if we get confused on that fact, we will miss much of what scripture can teach us.

Jacob was born a twin, the second of two boys. The story of his birth portrays the twins struggling with each other in their mother's, Rachael's, womb and that Jacob is holding onto Esau's heel as they are being born. If you step back from the story a bit, and everything you learned about the story as a eight-year-old and read it freshly, as though reading it for the first time, letting the nuances of the story—the metaphorical symbols—teach you, you might find the 21st century and your life much closer to our ancestor Jacob.

Jacob was born into a rather dysfunctional family. Esau was his father's favorite; Jacob was his mother's favorite. Esau was the first-born and hence was in line, by Hebrew tradition, to receive two-thirds of the family inheritance; Jacob was only to get his portion of one-third of the family inheritance. While he was the apple of his father's eye, Esau had little interest in the family business, and I suspect his father, as well, based on his flippancy about his inheritance. He obviously didn't put up a verbal struggle as Jacob bargained to swap a bowl of soup for Esau's “first son's birthright.” “Who cares about my inheritance,” Esau said. Rachael, on the other hand, connived to take what rightfully belonged to her oldest son and give it to the younger one. Later she helped Jacob slip out of town to avoid Esau's anger.

So, Jacob wasn't perfect; neither was Isaac, Rachael, Abraham, or anyone else we know. We are all rascals in some ways and at the same time “God's chosen.” Ryan Gainey of Decatur, Georgia, was a noted horticulturist, living not too far from the campus of Columbia Seminary. I especially appreciated the title of one of his books: *The Well-Placed Weed*. What makes most gardens so delightful is to see many colors and contrasts. Everything, even a weed, has a certain

beauty and quality when mixed with the rest of God's plants. Queen Anne's Lace and Spider Worts, after all, are classified as weeds.

If read carefully, the whole of the Old Testament—and the New Testament—is about showing us the better way to God. Scripture depicts both success and failure, advances and retreats, “the best of times—the worst of times.” How else can anyone explain the violent passages contained in both. The stories of Jacob—all of them—are about how Jacob struggled with himself and how he struggled with God. Anytime you are struggling with yourself, whether you know it or not, you are struggling with God.

Jacob ran from his brother and ran for his life. His mother suggested he go from Beersheba to Haran and work for her brother, Laban, who was several days' journey away. As Jacob was making his way to his uncle, he had a dream one night. In the dream, he saw a ladder, and on it angels were ascending and descending. The word used for “ladder” (*sullam*) is not at all what we think of as a ladder with rungs going “higher, higher.” It was rather like a ramp or escalator. The dream reflects a change in the Hebrew thinking about the existence of God. No longer did they believe that God walked on the face of the earth, but was rather in a place above where God lived. Also, the Hebrews, at that time in history, believed that God could only be worshipped in Canaan.¹

In this dream, Jacob with all of his disconnections from family and friends envisions an entrance to God and the peace, security, and reassurance that comes from being close to the very center of life. Obviously, he was aware of the blessing given to his grandfather, Abraham. His people ultimately were to be given tillable land (the Promise Land) and were to be made prosperous. Jacob had tried to carve out his future by being deceitful to his own father, by manipulating his brother out of his rightful inheritance and the blessing of his father, and by siding with his mother to be dishonest with his twin brother. You can only cheat your way so far in life. If everyone doesn't see you for what you've been, you will finally see yourself for what you've been.

Once the sun goes down out in the middle of nowhere, with only his guilt and loneliness, the hard earth as his bed, and a hard rock for his pillow, he had a

¹ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press: 1961) p. 285.

dream of being close to God. And in the dream, Jacob encounters the Lord, who reminds him of the promise given to his grandfather, his father, and now being given to him.

When Jacob awoke from the dream, he said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it! How awesome is this place!"

Have you ever known someone who could never be happy or satisfied no matter where they were in life? Such people are always looking toward the next day, the next job, the next opportunity. Life is always happening somewhere else. They don't like anything about anything.

Maya Angelou once said, "If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude. Don't complain." There is a certain power in taking control of your life and attitude. This past week I was in a group and noticed that one person was wearing a plastic wristband and kept changing it in the course of the group's conversation. I finally asked her what was with the periodic changing of her bracelet. "Oh," she said. "I'm trying to break my habit of complaining and criticizing. Every time I complain, I change the bracelet as a reminder to break the habit. And, every time I catch myself criticizing someone or something, I change my bracelet to remind myself that I can do better." "If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude. Don't complain," Angelou counseled.

Jacob's insight about life was radically changed when he discovered that the very place at which he was sleeping was the very place of God's strong presence—not somewhere else...not where he had been living or where he was going, but right where he was at the moment. "How awesome is this place!"

The musician, songwriter, and folk philosopher who gave us reggae music, Bob Marley, once said, "Life is one big road with lots of signs. So, when you are riding through the ruts, don't complicate your mind. Flee from hate, mischief, and jealousy. Don't bury your thoughts, put your vision to reality. Wake up and live."

Advice columnist, Ann Landers, once responded to an "Ask Ann" writer who felt that nothing in his life was working: "Wake up and smell the coffee!" It was her way of saying, "You are missing some of the best things happening to you and they're all around you!"

Jacob's dream was similar. "You are looking for happiness, for success, for your rightful place in life, for God's blessing. Wake up! It's all around you. I am with you and will keep you wherever you go. I will not leave you until you are conscious of your ongoing blessing."

The hardships, deception, insecurities were not over for Jacob, but he carried the dream with him to the end of his life.

Remember who you are. You are a child of God. God has not forgotten you. God is all around you eager to provide the creative energy, the wisdom, the patience, the insight, and the peace you so desire. Give yourself over to the most precious relationship that is waiting for you. "Wake up and smell the coffee!"

Prayer

Genesis 28:10-19a

10Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. 11He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. 12And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. 13 And the LORD stood beside him and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; 14and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. 15Know 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." 16Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!" 17And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

18So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. 19aHe called that place Bethel;