

West Hartford United Methodist Church – 17 January 2016

Genesis "Epiphanies — Between A Rock And A God Place" by Pastor Ric Hanse

Records

"Ricky, I have great news," my brother Matty excitedly said over the telephone in 1993. "Dad was going to throw out all of your Frank Sinatra records, but I rescued them." "That is wonderful Matty! I am grateful! If you can hold on to them I'll get them from you when I am up for a visit this summer." "You can't have them Ricky. They're not yours anymore. If it wasn't for me they'd be in the trash. They're mine now." 'Oh. I see. Well.. .thanks for letting me know." Hanging up the phone I realized that within five minutes, feelings of shock, gratitude, disbelief, anger and amazement had run through and over me. Then I settled on the feeling that I'd been robbed.

Imagine how Jacob's older brother Esau feels upon discovering that his kid brother who tricked him out of his birthright has now stolen his father's blessing from him. Convinced that her husband Isaac is nearing the end of his life, Rebekah tells her smooth-skinned son Jacob to put on goat skins while she cooks some of the tasty wild game that Esau is so good at hunting and preparing. "Bring this food into your father, convince him that you are Esau and take Esau's blessing." The reuse works and Jacob steals Esau's blessing. Discovering that he's been duped out of his blessing an enraged Esau decides it's time to kill Jacob. Rebekah convinces her favorite son to flee.

Ladders

Fearing for his life, Jacob packs some belongings and takes off. With no family to help him or keep him company and no homeland to all his own Jacob is alone — terribly alone. This awful loneliness crushes his spirit and exhausts his body. Stopping in a barren and rocky area Jacob sets up a rock as a pillow, gets out his blanket, lies down and falls fast asleep.

While sleeping beneath the towering rocky outcroppings that surround him, Jacob dreams of a stairway rising from earth to heaven. God is at the top of this magnificent stairway, and angels — powerful, mighty messengers of the Lord — are walking up the steps, delivering their reports to God, then walking down the steps and into the world where they are doing God's work. Next Jacob dreams that God is talking to him. "Jacob, I am the Lord, the God of your Father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. I am with you and I will watch over you wherever you go. I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you."

Waking in a sweat with his heart racing Jacob cries out, "I have been in God's presence!" Convinced that this is a sacred space, Jacob stands his rock pillow on end, consecrates the rock with oil and names the place Bethel, which means *house of God*. But ever the suspicious conniver, Jacob promises God that he'll be faithful only if certain conditions are met. "Lord, You will be my God if You give me food, clothing, protection and this land." God in His amazingly patient grace agrees.

Epiphanies

In the midst of the nightmare that is Jacob's life God gives Jacob the gift of an epiphany. Epiphanies are revealings. The Magi's visit to Jesus is called Epiphany because through the star God *reveals* to these wise men that a new King of the Jews has been born in Bethlehem. We are now in the spiritual season called Epiphany. This is the season of revealings. For four weeks we are going to spend time discovering how God reveals Himself to us. We'll receive epiphanies (revealings) from God through the lives of Gideon, Mary and Ananias. But for now, let's get back to Jacob.

Epiphany Times Three

The frightened, lonely Jacob receives an amazing three-part epiphany from God. Through the dream of angels going up and down the staircase God's assures Jacob that Jacob is not alone. Jacob may have left his father's house but his father's God has not left Jacob.

The second epiphany Jacob experiences is that Jacob will not remain homeless. God will give Jacob the land he has fled. Jacob's homeland will belong to Jacob and his people.

Finally, God reveals to Jacob that though he currently has no family to care for, and no family that will care for him, Jacob will have so many ancestors that they will be as plentiful as the dust of the earth. God assures Jacob that he will have someone to love and someone who will love him in return.

Revelations For Today

Through the story of Jacob, God has three wonderful epiphanies for us. First, we do not have to be righteous in order for God to come to us. Jacob has a dream. Not a vision — a dream. In the Hebrew Bible God gives visions to those who are faithful to Him — prophets and priests. But God gives dreams to false prophets, to pagan kings and to those outside the Faith. Jacob is an outsider. Through the story of Jacob, God reveals to us that He does not wait for us to become faithful insiders before coming to us. Jesus comes into the world for us while we are outsiders in order to bring us in. Are you feeling unworthy? That is no problem for God! Epiphany number two for you: God is infinitely patient. Through the story of Jacob God reveals us to that He is patient, patient, patient! Jacob bargains with God — as if he is in a position to do so! — by demanding protection and provision from God. Only then will Jacob make the Lord his God. God patiently listens to Jacob. And then God works with what Jacob offers. God is patient with Jacob. God is patient with us. And Jesus always works with whatever it is that we offer to Him.

The third epiphany God gives us through this great story is this: God is with us. Jacob does not know he needs God. But God knows Jacob needs God, and so God comes to Jacob, Our God Jesus knows that we need Him. Every day Jesus comes to us and reveals Himself to us. God comes to us through events, through nature, through blessings, and through stresses, through the Bible, through songs and through silence.

This morning please know that God is speaking to you. He is speaking to you through me and using me to reveal to you three wonderful gifts that he is giving you: You don't have to have it all together in order for God to come to you. God is infinitely patient with you. And Jesus is with you always — no matter what