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“Moments of Grace”

Genesis 28:10-19a, <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=177664724>

Everyone has a back-story. In a 2008 Harvard Commencement address, “The Fringe Benefits of Failure,” *Harry Potter* author J.K. Rowling shares a bit of hers. She speaks of her own decision to study classics at university, a decision that her parents never knew until her own graduation, as they tried to steer her toward a vocational degree and a career ladder that would land her keys to an executive washroom in a high-ranking corporation. She tells of spending more time in coffee shops writing stories than sitting in lectures, but was good at exams and graduated without a hitch. As her story unfolds, she tells that seven years later she realized many of her parents’ fears. Her “extremely short-lived marriage” imploded; she was jobless, an alone parent, and as poor as possible in modern Britain without being homeless.ⁱ Yet she goes on to share what she refers to as the fringe benefits of failure. For Rowling, there was a “stripping of the inessential” that occurred, and she was able to direct all of her energy to what really mattered. She was set free. Her greatest fear had been realized, therefore she could take stock in what she had: a daughter she adored, an old typewriter, and an idea. She says: “Rock-bottom became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life.”ⁱⁱ As the final movie of the *Harry Potter* film dynasty hit the theaters last week, it is evident that she has achieved even more than she may have imagined.

In our text for today, we meet Jacob after he had hit a personal low. In reading his back story, we find that his journey to Haran is more than an excursion to the home of his mother’s family to find a wife. He is a man on the run. At his mother’s urging, Jacob is fleeing the wrath of his twin brother Esau, who is planning to murder Jacob. This story goes back even further – to Jacob, the younger brother, swindling his brother’s birthright for a pot of stew and then later stealing his father’s blessing and inheritance by disguising himself as his older brother. When we meet Jacob today, he is alone in the world with nothing but a nearby rock to use for a pillow. He is a fugitive, a stranger in a strange land, heading to the home of his uncle with only a hope he will find acceptance and a wife in his household.

For Jacob, rock-bottom becomes the solid foundation on which God rebuilds his life.

As Jacob goes to sleep that night, a vision from God appears. The vision is of a ladder stretching between earth and heaven, upon which angels ascend and descend between the two realms. And then, God appears, and God speaks to Jacob:

“I am your God – the God of your father and grandfather. I am your God too. I will take care of you. You may not have a home now, so I will give you this land. You may not have a family now, but I will give you descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth – so many that you will spread out in all directions of the map. I know you stole your brother’s blessing, but I’m going to give a blessing to you and your offspring that is more than you can imagine. I know you feel alone, but I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go.”

Jacob's ladder is an image in scripture that catches our attention. We are compelled to interpret its meaning as we try to make sense of our own dreams when we wake up. Some commentators – particularly the likes of Calvin and Luther – say that the ladder is Jesus himself, the mediator between heaven and earth, the one through whom God is with us. Yet other interpretations are also worthy of note. An essay entitled “The Ladder to Heaven”ⁱⁱⁱ shares the interpretation of Levi Yitzhak, a widely acclaimed Hasidic scholar, who suggests that the ladder represents humanity in the world – “firmly planted on the earth ... (with) bodily needs and earthly desires. But through religious practice and striving we are capable of ‘reaching upward’^{iv} through relationship with God, and discerning and obeying God’s will.” Another interpretation suggests that the ladder represents one’s religious walk, and the ups and downs of such a journey. At times we experience a nearness to God, at other times we falter and are distant from God. Yet the ability to draw near to God is always present, and in fact sometimes our descents lead to profound ascents into God’s presence.

Perhaps, as often the case with dreams, these interpretations are all a bit true.

Yet as much as we’d like to, we can’t stay with the ladder too long. See, the heart of this passage is that *promise* of God – *a God who reaches out to Jacob through dreams and angels; a God who reaches out to us*. We see so early on in our Scriptures evidence of God’s desire to be “God with us” – to enter into the true mess of human life and offer new possibilities, new direction, new life.

Our passage tells of a God who loves God’s people. And what’s funny about this God is that God loves God’s people even through their – *our* – missteps and mistakes. God is not willing to let human downfall define human life. **God truly is the God of possibility** – a God who knows what we lack and offers it to us; a God who comforts us in our fear, engages us in our isolation, leads us to right paths for God’s namesake. God is a God who can take the rubble we create – a mess of bad choices, greed, fear, our own sinfulness and that sins that have been inflicted upon us – and create something new. God doesn’t erase the past, or even disguise it, but takes what we have and builds on it, usually offering us something better than we could ever imagine on our own.

At times, we get glimpses of God at work in our own life. We, like Jacob, experience a moment of grace where that veil between earth and heaven is thin and we can see with clarity God at work in our lives. We receive a reminder of God’s promises and are encouraged to live our days in hope. Perhaps it is a perfectly timed note of thanks, or an experience of unmerited forgiveness. Perhaps it is simply waking just before sunrise with just enough time to roll over and see the first break of dawn’s light streaming over your flowerbeds. Perhaps it is finding the courage in a moment of adversity to stay calm and loving. Perhaps it is opening God’s word and feel as if the words were written right to you. It often catches us by surprise, yet when it happens we know that God’s timing is somehow perfect.

That's what happened with Jacob. This greedy young man with a narrow vision of his future became the one through whom a nation of God's people would be named and claimed as God's beloved. Jacob *was* blessed with a large family, many children, and much wealth. And, as the story continues, he even reconciled with his brother Esau.

God keeps God's promises to *us*. The truth is, though, that God is everywhere. As our Psalmist reminds us, even when we try to run and hide; or even when our vision is clouded with the demands of the day and we just can't see: **God is with us**. God's grace is available, all around. Sure, it might seem elusive, or even invisible. But the promise of our faith is that the God who was with Jacob; the God who blessed Jacob – is the God who is with us, blessing us, calling us to new life. God knows *us*, is with *us*, has fashioned *us* in God's own image. There is no where we can run from God – God is with us, always.

What is your back-story? Which events mark the chapters of your life? Whose whispers in your ear have encouraged you onward – or confused you with lies? What do you carry with you today – baggage from the past, or dreams for a better future? What is your back-story?

I encourage you also to be mindful of the back-story of others. Know that those you encounter come carrying a story all their own, full of ups and downs that have shaped how they experience life. And so strive to be gracious to those you meet, with gratitude for God's gift of grace to you.

Know that your story isn't over, nor does it sit on a shelf isolated from other stories through the binding of a hard cover and a locked clasp around the pages. **Your story, like Jacob's, is in fact part of God's story. For it is the solid foundation from which God can build a future, call you onward in hope, lead you into a fullness of life.**

We may only recognize moments of grace in our lives, as fleeting as dreams, that reminds us of this truth. But the truth holds firm. God is with us too – in the lonely places and in the crowd; in our greed and in our humility; in our scheming and in our dreaming. By grace we are loved; by grace we are redeemed; by grace we are joint heirs of the kingdom of God.

Thanks be to God.

ⁱ http://www.ted.com/talks/jk_rowling_the_fringe_benefits_of_failure.html

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ “The Ladder to Heaven: Three Hasidic interpretations of the ladder in Jacob's dream shed light on humanity's relationship with God.”

<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Judaism/2000/12/The-Ladder-To-Heaven>

^{iv} Ibid.