

Today’s Scripture Lesson tells the story of Jacob who was a very colorful and deeply flawed character in the Bible. From the time of his birth he was jealous and ambitious. Jacob was the grandson of Abraham and Sarah, and the son of Issac and Rebecca. He has a twin brother named Esau and from the time of his birth Jacob was jealous of Esau. In fact, during their birth Jacob grabbed Esau’s heel, thus he was given the name Jacob which means “heel-puller” in Hebrew. These twins are very competitive, especially for their father’s affection. Issac clearly favors Esau because he is the firstborn. So out of jealousy Jacob does a terrible thing. He steals his brother’s blessing and birthright (which is the right to be recognized as the firstborn child.) He exploited the weakness of his brother, and tricked his blind father. He appears to have no conscience whatsoever.

Esau is absolutely furious about this and he decides to kill Jacob. His life is ruined without his father’s birthright or blessing, because this could not be revoked or reversed, so he decides to murder his twin brother. His mother Rebecca gets wind of this and tells Jacob that he must flee, saying: “Get out of here, your brother is going to kill you. Once he calms down, maybe I can bring you back.”

So Jacob sets off for a far country in the north to escape his brother’s wrath. He was probably about 15 years old. No doubt he was anxious and afraid, wondering if he will ever see his family again. He lays his head upon a rock and undoubtedly thought about them—his brother’s anger, his father’s disappointment, his mother’s unconditional love. He probably had never been away from home before, it had to be frightening. He was in a strange place, alienated from the people he loved, with an uncertain future ahead.

Then, a remarkable thing happened. Very often in Scripture God comes to people in dreams, and that is exactly what happens to Jacob. He falls asleep and dreams that there was a ladder extending into Heaven with angels ascending and descending. And God was standing over the ladder, saying to Jacob, “I am with you and I am giving this land to you and your descendants who will stretch from west to east and

north to south. I will protect you, I will not leave you until I have done everything that I have promised you.”

When Jacob awakened everything was transformed, most of all himself. He says, “God is in this place and I did not even know it.” God assured him that he is never alone, so out of gratitude Jacob makes a memorial to God and promises to give God one tenth of everything he ever receives.

After this encounter, Jacob travels on hoping to make a fresh start. He moves to the east and arrives in Paddanaram, where he falls in love with Rachel. He agrees to work 7 years for her father in order to win her hand in marriage. He does this, and marries Rachel, but on his wedding night, her father sends her older sister Leah to the wedding tent. Jacob does not realize this until the next day. Jacob is furious, and confronts his father-in-law who says: “In our country we do not marry off the younger daughter before the older daughter. You can have Leah, but you will have to work another 7 years for Rachel.” So he does and ends up with not just two wives, but four, because as was the custom in that day, he also got the maidservants of Leah and Rachel.

A bizarre beginning to Jacob’s family tree: two fighting sisters, one of whom is not loved by her husband, slave women with no choice in the matter, a husband with a very shady past and a father-in-law seeking to get ahead at his son-in-law’s expense. This is a soap opera which makes *Desperate Housewives* look mild.

Yet this dysfunctional family is the beginning of something big. They are the foundation of the nation of Israel, because the 12 sons born to Jacob and his 4 wives become the progenitors of the 12 Tribes of Israel. Additionally, this less than ideal family is the beginning of the lineage of Jesus Christ. When Jesus is born he is from the tribe of Judah, and Judah is one of the sons of Jacob and Leah.

So Jacob, with his colorful past and crazy family was transformed by God to populate the earth and set the stage for the coming of God in the flesh. A very rough beginning was transformed into a blessing for all generations. This story reminds us that God can indeed use shaky starts to accomplish amazing things. God used the family of a thief and fugitive to fulfill this covenant with humankind.

This experience of transformation happens again and again in the Bible, and that is why these stories are so promising. Broken people, deeply flawed people, come into contact with the living God and they are changed. They are selfish and flawed one minute, and wise and generous the next. The broken and wounded are made whole and complete.

Now most of us will not have a vivid dream in which God comes to us at the top of a ladder reaching up to Heaven, with angels scattered all over the place. Few of us will be chosen to accomplish truly amazing things in this world, nor will we experience dramatic callings from God. But I believe God still comes to us. It is subtle and often silent. Occasionally in dreams, through our subconscious, in the form of other people, music, nature, and of course through the church and the sacraments of the church. God is reaching out to change us into much better versions of ourselves.

Philip Yancey tells the story of Ernest Gordon, a British army officer captured by the Japanese during World War II. In his prison camp, all of the men lived like animals and it was every man for himself. But one day, a Japanese guard discovered that a shovel was missing. When no one confessed to stealing it, he screamed, "All must die! All must die!" and raised his rifle to shoot the first man in line. At that instant, an enlisted man stepped forward and said, "I did it." Enraged, the guard immediately shot him. That evening, when the tools were counted again, the work crew discovered that a terrible mistake had been made. No shovel was missing at all. One of the prisoners whispered, "Greater love has no one than this—that they would lay down their life for their friends." Attitudes in the camp began to shift when they realized their innocent friend had laid down his life for them. Now, instead of caring only for themselves, prisoners began looking out for each other. In time, the transformation was so complete that when liberation finally came, the prisoners actually treated their sadistic guards with kindness, and not with revenge.

Of course this is what Jesus Christ does for us—lays down his life. And in that unselfish, gracious act, there is the power of transformation. We have the benefit of something that Jacob and his descendants did not have. Although they clearly set the stage for it, they did not yet have the

experience of a God who became flesh. Fortunately we do. We have that living presence, that spiritual power which has the capacity to transform us even now. It is a power to help us live with trust and not fear, hope and not despair. Fear lies buried so deeply within the human psyche—fear of loss, failure, rejection, loneliness and death. Even fear of life. But fear of living, fear of dying and everything in between, is what Jesus came to save us from.

He came to help us see that we were created in the perfect image of God—that there is a divine essence within all of us. *Dalits* are the untouchables in India, and they are required by Hindu law to be given one name, and it must be derogatory: Ugly, Dung, Stupid. Imagine the transformation that occurs when *Dalits* discover that in Jesus, God came to earth precisely as a *Dalit*, as a poor untouchable, and that in the eyes of his God every last one of us is named: Chosen. Holy. Beloved. That is the transforming power of God.

But back to Jacob. Eventually the time came for him to return home. By this time he was healthy, wealthy, and wise with four wives and many children—he had to be about as happy as anyone could possibly be (although some of you are thinking that with four wives he could not have been all that happy!) He had it made, except for the demons of his past. How would the elder brother he had cheated and taken advantage of react to his homecoming after all these years? Could Esau possibly forgive his twin who cheated him out of his birthright and blessing? Or was Esau just waiting for a chance to get even?

Jacob was numb at the thought of what this encounter might bring, as he journeyed with his large family to the land God had promised him. Finally he arrived, and all that stood between him and the promised land was the River Jabbok. He sent his wives, children and all of his possessions on ahead, while he stayed there one last night. Perhaps he needed time alone, time to make a plan for meeting Esau again. Without warning a stranger leapt out of the darkness and hurled himself at Jacob. They fell to the ground and tumbled and twisted and fought all through the night. By daybreak it appeared that Jacob was winning this fight, but suddenly everything changed. The stranger simply touched the hollow of his thigh, and he was injured, in fact he was helpless. He

realized that nothing could help him now—not his strength, his mind, his power, he was licked. This opponent was more than another human being—it was something else. In the light of day he saw the face of pure love staring right through him. Even in his weakness and fear, Jacob hung on, saying “I will not let go unless you bless me.” Then the stranger asked “What is your name?” He said “Jacob.” The voice said: “Your name shall be Jacob no more, but Israel, which means “One who strives with God,” for you have wrestled with God and prevailed.” Jacob named that place Peniel (God’s Face) because here he saw God face to face and lived to tell about it.

He then crossed the River, looked up and saw Esau coming with 400 men. He walked toward him and as he approached he bowed 7 times, as was the custom in order to honor his brother. Esau ran and embraced him, held him, kissed him, and they both wept. These long estranged brothers were reunited and all would be well.

Through the transforming power of God, people in every age have been given new birth, new life, and new beginnings. It happened to Jacob and his descendants who populated all of Israel. And from these descendants, centuries later, came Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, who has the power to bless and transform us even now.