

Do you ever think that God must only appear to **holy** people?

These lucky characters in the Bible, who experience God in dreams, and hear him audibly, they must be exceptionally, squeaky clean, saintly individuals, mustn't they?

But hang on a minute, let's rewind to the previous chapter and understand *why* Jacob is leaving his home in Beersheba and taking a jolly trip to his uncle Laban's home in Paddan Aram (an area in West Asia).

Genesis **27** (*the previous chapter*) is a suspenseful story of trickery and deceit, and well worth a read. Jacob is, in fact, fleeing from his twin brother, Esau. Together with Rebekah, their mother, Jacob has deceived their elderly, visually impaired father, stealing Esau's rightful blessing as the elder brother by impersonating him to gain what was rightfully Esau's.

The *significance* of this act meant that Jacob would receive God's rich blessings and promises, and he would be served by others and **'be Lord over his brothers'**, including Esau.

This was a detailed plan of deceit hatched by his mother but carried out by Jacob against his twin. Hardly the behaviour of a saint!

In Genesis chapter 25 we learn:

When the time came for (Rebekah) to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. 25 The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau ('hairy'). 26 After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob.

Now, having had twins myself, who were born only 20 minutes apart, you'd be surprised at how much it seems to matter who is the 'eldest'! In Biblical times it was very significant.

Jacob's name means "supplanter," and "heel-catcher,"

To supplant means **'to supersede and replace'**. This is exactly what Jacob did. He came out clinging to his brother and when they grew up he pulled Esau behind himself in order to get ahead of his brother.

I wonder if any of you have a sibling?

I have an older brother. I *get* what sibling rivalry is about.

My brother Steve, hated losing a game, and unlike me, he was a rotten cheat! We had a game of scrabble and the letter 'S' which was always a sought-after letter, had somehow fallen into the fire and melted, so that it had become curved and misshapen. My brother would always 'accidentally' find the 'S' by feeling around in the bag for its unusual shape. He always won scrabble.

Whenever we had a race upstairs if I was winning, as I approached the landing he would grab me by the T shirt, pull me behind him, push me down the stairs and race ahead. I can remember being furious with him.

Esau was furious with Jacob. Now Esau was no saint either. He had despised his entitled birthright and rashly sold it to Jacob for a bowl of stew years before,

(Genesis 25) and now, through a serious act of deception, Jacob has received Esau's blessing from their Father.

So *angry* was Esau, that he planned that after their father Isaac died he would kill Jacob, and effectively regain his birthright.

So Jacob is on the run. He has an uncertain future in his uncle's land and a tarnished past in the home he has left. He is kind of, in 'no man's land'. Settled nowhere and on the run.

I wonder what Jacob was feeling on his journey?

Some of us here today will know that is hard to move away from family at the best of times, but when relationships have been fractured it is far more painful.

It can be especially hard when we know that *our behaviour* has caused that fracture.

We wonder if we will ever be allowed back in.

We wonder if we will ever have the relationships restored.

Perhaps Jacob, part-way through his journey, as he laid himself down with his head on a rock for a pillow, wondered if he had messed up completely.

And then God steps in - in a surprising encounter...

Jacob dreams about a ladder, (or in some translations) a staircase, which stretches from earth into heaven. God is standing at the top and angels are ascending and descending between heaven and earth while Led Zeppelin is playing a tune in the background... (*just seeing if you are still awake*)

And God, who has been with Jacob in it all, and seen it all, and heard it all, and knows it all, promises Jacob a future;

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.

14 Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south.

All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.

15 I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

It is a staggering promise to one who is called a deceiver, to one who has torn apart a family!

Does that give you hope?

It does me.

It tells me that God uses whom he uses, not just those who have done things the right way all their lives. He has plans for those of us who have broken relationships, and promises for those whose future appears bleak and uncertain.

Why does God do this? Is it fair? Hasn't Jacob done wrong? Who are **we** to ask?

The Bible says in Psalm 130:3-4

***If you, Lord, kept a record of sins,
Lord, who could stand?***

***4 But with you there is forgiveness,
so that we can, with reverence, serve you.***

God is faithful to his own character. He has promised that through Abraham (Jacob's grandfather) all nations would be blessed.

If God has promised something, he will fulfil it, regardless of the individual mess-ups of the people involved. This is called the '**Abrahamic Covenant**'

The promise given to Jacob in that dream is a repeat of the promise God gave to Jacob's father, Isaac (Genesis 26:3-4). And to Isaac's father, Abraham, (Genesis 13:14-17).

These are three almost identical repeated promises to the 3 generations.

We spoke last week in Morning Prayer about believing what God has said to us. How do we know if what we think is a promise of God and isn't just our own wishful thinking? How do we know that we are hearing the voice of the Spirit and not our own selfish desires?

I have probably told you before about my '3 nudges'. Sometimes I am sure I have heard something from God, but I don't want to get it wrong. And so I bring it before God and wait for another nudge. And sometimes it never comes, and I forget the idea. But if I get another sign I pray into the thought and wait. And if I get a **third** nudge, I trust that this is God speaking to me. This can be a helpful way of putting the brakes on rash choices and decisions.

It can be a way of reassuring us that what God has promised he will see to fruition.

And so, God has promised Jacob, the deceiver, the one whose life was in disarray, a fantastic future and the assurance that God will never leave him but will accompany him and watch over him wherever he goes. Despite his character and behaviour, God's promise stands firm.

The key thing about the **Abrahamic Covenant** is that it is unconditional.

A conditional covenant is a bilateral agreement that binds both parties. If either party fails to meet their responsibilities, the covenant is broken and neither party has to fulfill the covenant's expectations.

But an unconditional covenant is where one party promises the outcome with no conditions attached.

And so Jacob's character and behaviour and deceit didn't break the covenant, because **God had bound himself to his own promise**. And God keeps his word, because through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob *eventually* came the One who would completely fulfil the promise of God.

A promise of blessing and redemption. Jesus Christ ~ the one **who ensured that heaven collided with earth**. Jesus is the new Covenant between God and us. He brings forgiveness of sins and restored relationship with people whose hearts are turned toward Him.

Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection to life is the basis of this promise, so that when we, like Jacob, mess up our relationships, or are unfaithful to God, we have a path to healing and wholeness, because God is faithful to his unbreakable promise.

This healing extends to **all** nations and to **all** peoples, from the Old Testament and throughout generations to come. And we are among those who are destined for the eternal promised land.

And so was Zacchaeus... who we read about in Luke's Gospel. He was considered a 'sinner', a tax collector disliked by so many; one who had extorted money from his fellow Jews and behaved in a way that turned him into an outsider.

And yet, as Jesus passes by, he calls Zacchaeus (this unloveable figure) to descend from the tree, and commune with him. Whether Zacchaeus used a ladder or just climbed down we aren't told, but he descends to encounter God on earth.

These two narratives - of Jacob and of Zacchaeus - tell us that God and earth are not **separate entities** as some might think, as if God is a benevolent deity in the sky, and we are minions just milling down here, but there is **A WAY** that stretches between heaven and earth and connects us to God - and that **Way** is Jesus Christ.

Zacchaeus, when he encounters Jesus, recognises in himself, all the ways he has mistreated people, and God's Spirit convicts him. Notice that Jesus has said nothing to *condemn* Zacchaeus, all Jesus has done is invite himself into the man's life.

This gesture alone is enough for Zacchaeus to hunger for change. His repentance is so genuine and so demonstrative that he was declared by Jesus to be 'a son of Abraham.' What a title to be given to one who was outcast!

And so we are invited to *commune* with God, because, as Jacob's dream tells us, heaven touches earth and earth encounters heaven.

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, ***Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it."... How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."***

Jacob responded to God's *surprise on his journey* by setting up and anointing a monument to God, and making a promise in return that he will be *faithful* to God and give to God a 10th of all he is blessed with.

Notice too, how Zacchaeus' response to his encounter with Christ results in generosity of heart and possessions. **This is a sure sign that a heart has been changed** - when we long to give back to God of the blessings we ourselves have received.

Just as Zacchaeus descended from the tree and encountered God on earth, so too, can we come down from where we are, on our high horse, to encounter Christ.

Or maybe we are, right now, on the floor, and in the depths of despair, and maybe we need to *look up* and see that God is actually close with us. Speaking those words to us as he did to Jacob:

I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

Song for reflection ~ Promised land