

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship
July 20, 2008
Anita Rediger

A Rocky Place

Tonight, we've heard yet again from the biblical account; a biblical tale found in the "old covenant" and a parable of the kingdom given in testimony of that which is God's "new covenant." A tale and a parable which have been told and retold over thousands of years – layered one upon the other.

These accounts – together with all other biblical accounts - have been told and retold; written and rewritten alongside all of the other events that make up the history of the peoples of the earth. History – for most of us here - has been taught to us with a European emphasis. A few of us are persons bearing a different vantage point. Kathy and Derick, I think of the story of your peoples – African, American and Asian – stories that I have hardly any awareness of, stories that I would be hard pressed to bring alongside the biblical texts. These stories – offer continued growing edges for me in the understanding of God's story.

Tonight, *together*; here in Berne, Indiana we listen to these two biblical stories alongside our personal experiences of the past weeks and months, days and hours. Tonight, *together*; we listen to these accounts alongside our communal events of life in the Midwest USA 2008. We wonder again, yet we also wonder for the first time, since we've never been "right here" before- and after tonight we'll never be here again. May each of us receive God's invitation to venture into that welcoming wide space in which to listen, a place like a quiet room where our attentions are easily focused - a space like a great concert hall where in spite of its immensity – the most nuanced of tones can be discerned and delighted in.

The old story...once again new...scoot forward to the edges of your chairs and listen...

There wasn't much time to choose a more comfortable campsite – actually comfort wasn't even to be considered given the scheme of things. Night had fallen. It was dark and even though it was dangerous to stop now, it was even more dangerous to venture onward into the night. Disguise, escape, survival- these were the thoughts that were pressing on Jacob as he doggedly made his way northward from Beersheba. He had 400 miles to go, 400 miles on foot before he reached the safety of family in Haran. However, his final destination wouldn't matter in the least if, in these first dangerous hours of flight, he was unsuccessful in shaking off the possible pursuit of his fury-filled brother, Esau.

It had happened...just when it had appeared that everything was going to work out after all. To a wandering people, God had given a great promise which would bring blessing to all the nations of the earth. A great and wonderful blessing would be fleshed out

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through the people that would spring forth from the lineage of Abraham and Sarah. It had to start somewhere and this was where it was to begin...but the beginning was nearly a disaster!

God's promise had seemed good, even wonderful! God had identified a good man in Abram. Abram had started off on the right foot trusting God to set the course into uncharted territory. But even though everything was in place for the plan to take off – barrenness became a grim reminder that life doesn't always go according to plan. Babies...they come when least expected; they don't come when most desired...But as we know now, a close call was averted and, whew, in the nick of time, to the oldest set of parents ever, a hearty, healthy baby was born. Everything was back on track, and God's intentions seem back on course.

These intentions were most special. God had a promise that was going to spill over the lines and boundaries of family and tribe, of epoch and era. God's blessing wasn't a simple gesture of good will for a certain time and place; instead it was an intention to bring- again and again - great good into the world – great good, creative possibility, love without end – for everyone! Oh yes! But wait, where was I?

Before I got so caught up in the ancient promise, I had been telling you a story. Yes, a story about a fugitive...a man running from his brother, but not just any man, a man belonging to the lineage of Abraham and Isaac...the bearers of the blessings of the nations. Just when it had appeared that everything was going to work out after all... the dysfunctional dynamics in the home of Isaac and Rebekah have thrown God's purposes into disarray. It's not only a fleeting moment of confusion and chaos. This is deadly serious - once again everything is in question. God's intentions again face the grave threat of failure.

What a farce! A blessing bestowed upon a phony... and not just any blessing, but The Blessing! The blessing of God given to Abraham, the blessing for the healing of the nations- the blessing which had so nearly died out along with the aged members of Abraham and Sarah's bodies...how everyone had laughed when these two gave birth! Then came that tenuous time when Abraham and Isaac set out to Mount Moriah – with fire, with fuel and with a knife.(but no lamb) And now this?

It seems an understatement to say that God could have made a better choice, a better plan. This blessing – God's desire and delight to call forth a people to “flesh out” God's love for all of creation might have been sent by some more able messenger – but instead God risked (and entrusted) the Hope of the world to His creatures- into a man who would deceive his brother at the urgings of his mother, into the care of a man who would trick and lie outright to his sightless, frail father. Jacob – a man whom reminds me of another

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second son...one who really didn't have any idea of what he was asking for when he came to his father for his inheritance save a selfish pursuit of his own future. But now, Jacob, "stealthy younger brother, saturated by deception, is a carrier of God's goodness and will for life." Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home*, pg.64. Jacob received far more than he had reckoned with. Jacob will carry this blessing, but it will be a great responsibility, a great burden – to be so "chosen."

Yes, trickster Jacob received the blessing of Isaac, which had come to him from his father Abraham, which Abraham had received from the Lord. (as he traveled **to** the Promised Land) But on this night- far afield – it isn't worth a thing to him. Jacob finds himself alone –very alone- alone in the desert, among wild creatures of the night, exposed to the elements of the seasons, on someone else's turf, with someone else's blessing. (as he travels **away** from the Promised Land) Jacob is in a rocky place. It is night. It is a harsh place chosen simply because the sun had dropped from the western sky and because it was even more dangerous to continue than to hole up in this "God-forsaken" place. It is a bare, stony place and there are only boulders for pillows. How good could tomorrow possibly be if the night is to be spent on a bed of stones? What about Jacob's tomorrow? What about the promise of God – for tomorrow and beyond?

No, it wasn't supposed to be this way. But it was...and it still is. Yes, it still is. All around us, between us, within us - tensions, misunderstandings, right down cowardice and the fruits of fear – individually, communally, nationally. Even when we inwardly grieve our broken ways, outwardly we offer comforting platitudes. Remember Rebekah's hollow-sounding words to her favored Jacob – after she grasps the magnitude of the afternoon's trickery...she says, "*Flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran, and stay with him a few days, until your brother's fury turns away- until your brother's anger against you turns away, and he forgets what you have done to him..*"

Like Rebekah, we are tempted by the of fast-acting balm "wishful thinking." We guard ourselves against the intrusion of reality, of the uncomfortable actions or questions, of all that does not "fit" our system thinking. We often attempt to rewrite our stories, longing to shift the focus from the tangled places in our lives onto those of someone else.

Note that Rebekah approaches Isaac with laments concerning Esau's choice of Hittite wives and suddenly at this moment offers this as the reason that Jacob should move on to Haran... (Note the lack of dialogue between Isaac and Rebekah regarding this terrible deception that has left Isaac still trembling, Esau promising revenge and Jacob packing his bags.) No, Rebekah simply states to Isaac that it would break her heart if Jacob were to take such a wife as Esau's. She saves face by suggesting that Jacob leave home in order to seek a suitable wife among the relatives in Haran. It's embarrassing to witness, but this is how it was in this family and may be in our families and our communities, as well. (Not to be included in the spoken sermon.)

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And yet...God's work continues – and not just in spite of us, but rejoicingly together with us...around us, between us, within us, through us. God is strangely revealed to us in the most broken of times, in the most unlikely of persons and landscapes...when we are undone. “God's revealing is simultaneously an unveiling and a veiling.” Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, p.20.

Tonight, together, here in the place...how does this story speak to us? Where do the embers found in this ancient tale spark ready tinder within us? Let me “wonder aloud” about with you what it stirs within me. Let me speak some thoughts that come to me; ones that you might share, as well.

- First of all, as I found myself describing Jacob to you, suddenly I was awash with a really unpleasant sense of identification with the man. You, may remember, I noted the irony of God's blessings being entrusted to a person, like Jacob, “a phony.” What a word! I realized that for me personally “phony” would be one of the most hurtful terms that could be spoken to me...yet creeping into my consciousness through these days of study has been a recognition of prideful places that truly could qualify as “phony” ways of following Jesus. Perhaps, not consciously “fibbing,” yet “qualifying” my story – at least to myself - enough to make it seem more “acceptable.” I continue to discover over these past months, especially since the birth of this fledging congregation and also alongside of the communal struggle many of us share with First Mennonite, a painful awareness of my own “baggage.” I continue – to my astonishment- to bump into walled off places of my personal pilgrimage that God seeks to open. And it hurts!
- Secondly, like the first followers, individually and collectively – I wonder if we don't find it really difficult to tell if we are moving toward or away from God's beckoning call. It's hard to figure out God's “handsignals.” (Like hooking on farm equipment for your sons or husband!) At times, we jerk forward. At other times we back up too quickly only to pinch someone else's fingers! (and bump our own head) On my faith journey I experience ambivalence and anger, excitement and energy, disappointment and dismay. As part of this Emmaus Road people I find myself, at times, striding boldly – and at others times tentatively, unsure of the terrain ahead. Of course, always seeking and desiring a nice comfortable campsite!! ☺

Concluding Words:

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Yet, this is what I understand at this place on the road...I seem prone to forget God's promise (always surprisingly) is "unveiled" in the "ongoingness" (Hall) of life - God's promptings are deeply woven throughout the "ins and outs" of life - challenging our certitudes and questioning our assumptions. God - at work along the rocky edges of our stories, found flourishing among wheat **and** tares. This is the promise of God to the nations - the promise in which we hope, the promise of the kingdom *in which we live, and move and have our being*. While sleeping, this God awakened within Jacob the awareness that he is part of a great story - one greater than family squabbles and power plays. Emmaus Road Fellowship - we, too, may find ourselves in rocky places, but may we - together - remind each other that we are part of a great story, God's story. May we dream together of God's ever enlivening ways with us. May we remember even on wilderness days - that God sojourns with us - for there is no place, no time, no people - too unholy, too unworthy, too weedy to bear the promises of God for the healing of the nations.