

Gen. 35:1-20

Jan. 9, 2011

With our season of Advent, we've spent a few weeks away from the Book of Genesis, so I want to recap briefly where left off in God's story of the patriarchs. After the pivotal account of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son Isaac, we shifted focus to Isaac and his wife Rebekah. Although Rebekah was barren, Isaac prayed to the Lord for children, and God blessed them with twins, Jacob and Esau. From the get-go, Jacob and Esau competed with each other over just about everything. Ultimately, Jacob tricked his brother to trade his status as the firstborn son for a bowl of lentil stew.

After this, Jacob fled his homeland in fear that Esau would try to kill him. Eventually Jacob married Leah and Rachel, and prospered. Eventually God leads Jacob to return to his homeland, which is a great blessing but also means that an encounter with Esau is unavoidable. Our last passage from Genesis 32 described Jacob wrestling with God. While he physically wrestled, he also did so as a divided person. Jacob struggled to submit to God, yet also yearned to be close to God and enjoy His blessings. As a result of that mysterious encounter, Jacob is a changed man both spiritually and physically. His wounded hip would serve to remind him that God had changed his heart, and his new name of "Israel" testified to that transformation.

In chapter 33, Jacob and Esau meet, and much to Jacob's astonishment Esau is also a changed man. The brothers are reconciled. The next chapter presents a disturbing record of Jacob's sons taking violent revenge against a town where their sister Dinah was raped. While we won't be looking at that chapter in detail, we need to keep it in mind for a couple of reasons. First of all, the situation exacerbated relations between God's people and their neighbors, the Canaanites and Perizzites. And second, we see that at least some of Jacob's sons have violent tendencies. This will come into play next week when we see how they treat their younger brother, Joseph.

So for today, we turn to Gen. 35. As we'll see, there are actually several events mentioned briefly in this passage, and we'll spend a bit of time on each of them to see how they tie together God's work in Jacob's life.

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¹ Then God said to Jacob, “Go up to Bethel and settle there, and build an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau.”

² So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves and change your clothes.” ³ Then come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone.” ⁴ So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods they had and the rings in their ears, and Jacob buried them under the oak at Shechem. ⁵ Then they set out, and the terror of God fell upon the towns all around them so that no one pursued them.

⁶ Jacob and all the people with him came to Luz (that is, Bethel) in the land of Canaan. ⁷ There he built an altar, and he called the place El Bethel, because it was there that God revealed himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother.

⁸ Now Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, died and was buried under the oak below Bethel. So it was named Allon Bacuth [which means oak of weeping].

⁹ After Jacob returned from Paddan Aram, God appeared to him again and blessed him. ¹⁰ God said to him, “Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel.” So he named him Israel.

¹¹ And God said to him, “I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your body. ¹² The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you, and I will give this land to your descendants after you.” ¹³ Then God went up from him at the place where he had talked with him.

¹⁴ Jacob set up a stone pillar at the place where God had talked with him, and he poured out a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it. ¹⁵ Jacob called the place where God had talked with him Bethel.

¹⁶ Then they moved on from Bethel. While they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and had great difficulty. ¹⁷ And as she was having great difficulty in childbirth, the midwife said to her, “Don’t be afraid, for you have another son.” ¹⁸ As she breathed her last— for she was dying —she named her son Ben-

Oni [which means “son of my struggle or grief”]. But his father named him Benjamin [which means “son of my right hand or favor”].

¹⁹ So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). ²⁰ Over her tomb Jacob set up a pillar, and to this day that pillar marks Rachel’s tomb.

This is the Word of the Lord.

As you know, in recent weeks there has been a big stink about the response of New York’s sanitation department to the blizzard on Christmas weekend. Many of us also have stories about frustrating plowing issues here in Carteret and nearby towns. One of the news stories I found most appalling happened in Brooklyn, where plows dumped tons of snow on a Jewish cemetery. The careless negligence of the workers destroyed 21 headstones along with an iron fence.

A few days ago the department issued a statement about the incident: "Unfortunately, during ongoing emergency snow clearing operations outside of the cemetery, the fence along the cemetery collapsed due to piled snow. The Department is reaching out to cemetery officials to provide them with the necessary paperwork to file a claim." The problem with that statement is that it is purely practical, and mentions nothing about the headstones. Even more, there is nothing to acknowledge the emotional impact destroying the headstones has had on family members, or that something held to be sacred has been defaced.

It’s clear from this example in Brooklyn and from our passage today that places are special to us, and it’s been part of the human experience to mark such important places for thousands of years. If you take just a moment to think about the most noteworthy places from your life, what would they be? /// My guess is that just bringing them to mind floods your thoughts with memories and emotions, some good, some sad, some joyful, perhaps even some traumatic. Whether we have physically marked those places with mementos, or whether they are marked forever in our minds, they remain with us and continue to shape who we are.

As Genesis 35 opens, we find the only place in the entire Bible where God tells someone to go to a certain place and build an altar to Him. So we have to ask ourselves, why of all people and circumstances might God have chosen to make such

a command to Jacob, at Bethel? I think the reasons we explore are going to highlight for us the themes that tie the rest of our passage together.

First of all, I'd like to point out verse 1: note that God "says" to Jacob. As minor as this may seem initially, when we compare this with previous sections of Genesis we see that God didn't always just talk to Jacob. Before, Jacob encounters God. The Lord speaks to Jacob in a dream. Jacob wrestles with God. The importance of verse 1 is that Jacob's intimacy with God has grown so much that God doesn't have to pursue him anymore to get his attention. God speaks to Jacob as if He is talking with a friend— because that is the case. Jacob really has become Israel, a new man of God.

Second, God reminds Jacob in verse 1 that He is returning Jacob and his clan back to Bethel, just as He had promised years before during the wrestling match. The Lord reminds Jacob that back then, he was fleeing from Esau— and look what's happened since then. Jacob has prospered, has reconciled with his brother, and is now ready to settle in Bethel and be God's people in the midst of a pagan land. God is essentially asking Jacob to notice just how far the Lord has brought him, how much he has grown as a man of God, how the Lord has kept him safe, and that God is committed to fulfilling promises that will reach far beyond Jacob's own lifetime.

God's directions to Jacob in verse 1 are crucial because they help us to understand why Jacob instructs everyone with him to bury their idolatrous trinkets. It's as if Jacob does see how much he has grown spiritually, and thinks, "Wow, the Lord has fulfilled His promises to me, and now that He's bringing me back to Bethel, I have to get my spiritual house in order." Jacob sees that he has to take leadership and responsibility for his family, and ensure as well as he can that they are minding their spiritual p's and q's. Maybe he considers the fact that his sons have just murdered and plundered a town, and desires to give them a clearer example of godly behavior. Whatever his motive, it's clear that only Yahweh will be worshipped by Jacob's clan in Bethel.

For us today, it may sound a little odd for a man to tell his family to bury their earrings near a tree, so I want to explain what's going on there. The simple answer is that Jacob puts his household through a cleansing ritual. It's not that everyone's clothes were literally dirty. But their clothes were used when they were in their

soon-to-be former life when false gods were tolerated, and that day is now over. Changing their clothes was a symbol of a fresh start. This idea occurs numerous times in the New Testament when we are told to put off our old nature with its defilement and stains, and instead put on righteousness, humility, and holiness. We are clothed in Christ as a new creation, just as the Book of Revelation describes God's saints wearing white robes of purity and truth.

But the New Testament doesn't tell us to bury our earrings. Jacob's concern regards the practice of pagans in that day to wear earrings that were either shaped like various gods, or had the name of a god imprinted on them. This isn't just a fashion statement, however. It was also a common practice for slaves to wear earrings with the name of their master imprinted on them. The idea is that a person who wore the earring of a god or goddess was a loyal slave to that deity. In a sense, by wearing such earrings men and women showed submission and allegiance to that god. It's no wonder that Jacob ordered the earrings and everything else that had to do with false religion to be buried.

This passage is unusual because there is no similar account of God's people burying idols. And we're told that Jacob had them buried under the oak at Shechem, which was probably a giant tree that was commonly known. Yet we have to wonder why they buried them, and why there. Couldn't someone be tempted to return and dig up the idols, even just for the value of the metal? I think the key is that burials happen with dead things, and false gods are certainly dead. But the fact that they were buried in a prominent place was a witness to the community. Everybody would have known what was happening, and why. Jacob is declaring that Yahweh alone is the God of Israel. If anyone were brash enough to return to dig up the idols, that too would have been a public event that would have brought great scrutiny.

So the idols are buried in a special place, which is what we started this sermon thinking about. Everyone in Jacob's clan who passed that tree would be reminded that false gods and their trinkets were buried there, and that is precisely where they should stay. In contrast, the living God was the God who sustained that tree, and that is the God Jacob erected his altar to honor.

We are told that Jacob renames the place where the altar was erected. While this detail seems slight, it is again actually very important as we notice the change that has happened in Jacob's life. The name "Bethel" means "house of God," so when Jacob wrestled with God he intended to honor that place where God had met him. Here he renames the place "El Bethel," which means "the God of the house of God." Jacob has grown from wanting to honor the place, to honoring the God who brought him back there.

This is a very slight nuance, but it is critical that we note it for ourselves. The places where God has touched our lives are important, but they should never overshadow Him. This principle applies to other areas of our lives as well. I might give thanks for the people God brings into my life, but my relationship with the Lord is by far the most valuable. I can rejoice in the gifts and abilities God has given me, but if my focus in using those gifts drifts away from pleasing and obeying Him, I need an attitude adjustment. You may be grateful for the work the Lord has blessed you with, but we need to be mindful that the way we spend our time and resources is pleasing to Him. Why? Because it is so easy for God's blessings to become little idols if we are not spiritually diligent and careful. ///

The end of this passage mentions that God appears to his dearly loved son Jacob to convey another affirmation. They've buried the idols, and they have worshipped the Lord at a new altar. Jacob has renamed the place to honor God Himself, and not merely what happened there. Just as when Jacob was obedient before, God confirms that he is Israel, and all of the promises God made to Abraham and to him will come to fruition for generations to come.

In the midst of these promises for the future, Jacob is reminded of our mortality as human beings. His mother's nurse dies, and is buried right around the time they buried the dead false gods. Most poignantly of all, his dearly loved wife Rachel dies while giving birth to Benjamin. God's promises are real and will carry on, without Rachel and even without Jacob. Just as with other significant events and places, the burial spots of Deborah and Rachel are marked, to honor their memory and serve as witnesses for years to come. By the time of Jeremiah nearly 1200 years later, the location of Rachel's grave was still commonly known.

When I was studying for this sermon, several of the commentaries noted that this passage seems to be disjointed in covering a handful of apparently unrelated topics. But when we dig a little deeper, we see an underlying theme that God's purposes are always carried out, and like Jacob we can be blessed to take part in His work in the world. Like Jacob, we must always be on the alert to purge our hearts and lives of idols that divert our focus from the living God. Anything that detracts from Jesus having our complete allegiance must be buried, permanently. People and places come and go, but the Lord remains and rules eternally—so loving and pleasing Him has to be the mission of our lives, just as it was for this new man, Israel.

Many people, and even many churches, do not talk about sin. They talk about errors or mistakes in judgment, but not offenses against God's holiness that do real damage to our relationships with God and with one another. Aside from being unfaithful to Scripture, people who deny or avoid the reality of sin do themselves great harm. Imagine if Jacob had thought that the false gods and earrings were simply mistakes in judgment. His family probably would not have bothered to bury things that were just errors. Oops! In not burying them, they would have made no public testimony to their community about the reality, love, and holiness of the one true God. And the oak at Shechem could not be for them a reminder to be faithful to the Lord.

I encourage you to talk with the Lord about what in your life needs to be buried. This may be actual things that impede you from growing closer to the Lord. Or, you may need to change a practice or behavior that is unhealthy. What would the Lord have you bury? What might you need to cast away and leave behind, so you can turn to the Lord and be clothed in purity and righteousness? I hope you'll take some time later today to pray through this challenge from Jacob's example.

I'll close with a selection from Isaiah 61 (vv. 8-11). Hear these words with our passage about Jacob in mind.

"I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and wrongdoing. In my faithfulness I will reward my people and make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants will

be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the LORD has blessed.

“I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.”

Let us pray.