

“Homeward Bound”
 Sermon for 5 January 2020
 Texts: Genesis 28:1-9

Paul Simon is a song-writer and musical performer from the 1960's and he wrote our title song back in 1966. I liked it. Paul, 75 years old today didn't:

“No, the early songs I can't say I really like them. But there's something naive and sweet-natured about them and I must say I like that about them. They are not angry. And that means I wasn't angry or unhappy. And that is my memory about that time: it was just about idyllic.

The he continues:

It was just the best time of my life, I think, up until recently, these last five or six years . . . This has been the best time of my life.”

Whoa! We're talking about a gap of about fifty years! And you know what, that gap of fifty years is the same gap as my misperception regarding the episode in Jacob's life from our reading this morning. Jacob is not 26 years old when he sets out for Haran to find himself a wife; he's 76! The time for him to settle down has arrived in Gen. 28:1. Now what's even more remarkable about this age is that it is the time in his life when Jacob has his first divine encounter. That encounter is recorded as Jacob's dream. It is a shining moment when the God of his father and grandfather choose to reveal himself to Jacob as his own God. God appears standing over the stairway, “peopled” as it were, with ascending and descending angels. The ladder reached from earth to heaven and God is standing over that!

To get a little perspective, we note that Esau has been married thirty-six years as of this time. Both of the twins are ten years past what we generally consider retirement age and Jacob is just starting his married, family life by seeking a wife! It will take him seven years to accomplish that goal and another seven years of service to obtain Rachel—the woman he actually wanted to marry! So, the deception worked by Jacob and Rebekah on Isaac was no juvenile affair and the favoritism and sibling rivalry had been going on for 76 years! The family wasn't loving, God-centered or happy in this regard. Set in our world, this whole business would be viewed as something taking place on a geriatric ward! Jacob is in no rush to get married¹ after all he has another seventy-one years to live and his father would be alive for 43 of them. When Jacob returns, like the Prodigal Son, he is a sprightly ninety-six years of age—sprightly I say because he wrestles with the Angel of the Lord to a draw.

The chorus to “*Homeward Bound*” goes like this:

Homeward bound
 I wish I was
 Homeward bound
 Home, where my thought's escaping
 Home, where my music's playing
 Home, where my love lies waiting

¹ Abraham was 84 when Ishmael was conceived, and 100 when Isaac was born. Isaac was 60 when his twins were born. And Jacob was 84(?) when Reuben was born to Leah! That means Isaac preceded both his father and his son by some 24 years in starting his family! And the role of God in opening the wombs of these mature women (not girls!) is both late and miraculous.

Silently for me

My thought is that something like this was probably playing through Jacob's mind as he processed the trek to Haran, the time away from the only home and family he had ever known. Everyone who has left home has this "home-longing space" in his heart!—I do and I certainly could relate to the song's lyrics on many levels. I had a LL Bean backpack instead of a suitcase, a red plaid wool shirt and my Martin guitar strapped to my youthful back—but I actually held many train tickets in many train stations to several destinations² singing the songs of Paul Simon. Everyone but him liked them!

"Home" is where our thoughts go to, where familiarity is like "music to our ears," like the sound of the surf beside the ocean, or the rush of waters down a nearby stream. There are home sentiments, feelings, live bonds, ambiance and atmosphere that breathe in and through us, without our even being conscious of them. And the greatest of those longings³, was the idea of "love waiting at home—" something I deeply wanted home to be! We are heading home in our hearts even as we leave the station.

But, previewing the next few messages, Jacob's leaving home/separation was always connected with his return, with coming home again . . . *someday*. Separation, initiation and return—key terms in the rites of passage that inform our life's journeys. Jacob had to leave something behind (mother, father, homeland), pass through some trials and adversities/initiation as well as, on his own, having several God encounters (the blessing at Bethel (Gen. 28:13-15), the call of God to **return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you.** (Gen. 31:3). The sighting of the Lord's army (**the angels of God met him**, Gen. 32:1) on his way home(!); the wrestling match with "a man" identified in Hosea 12:2-3 as **the angel of the Lord/** or God, which tussle lasted all night—he was both sprightly and showed great endurance! (Gen. 32:24)—were all part of the journey. So **Jacob called the name of that place Peniel** (meaning "face of God"), the place where he was renamed **Israel** (which means "He strives with God") so named by God Himself. Note this striving is with God, a positive thing, not against God(!) as in his former, prolonged rebellion). **All of this being his initiation!** Both Esau and Jacob start off significantly carnal—that is one of the best explanations of Jacob's desire for both the **birthright** and the **blessing of the firstborn!** ***The temporal blessings were dominant over any spiritual ones.*** And,

² 1969 was in the Vietnam War era. And I had received a deferment, but not before contending with my father over being drafted into a lethal "police action" overseas. My plan had been to volunteer rather than to be "cannon fodder" in the service of my country if I ended up being drafted. Consequently it was my successful application to the Naval Air Force and my subsequent rejection for health reasons (!) that "freed" me to flee abroad and find myself in my very recent life as a God-fearer. I sang popular songs on the empty streets of London at dawn.

³ That is what Paul Simon's song communicates to me. "*Wednesday Morning at 3 a.m.*" and "*The Sounds of Silence*" were among the other early songs that their creator said "can't really say I like them" about. But I have very fond memories of all three songs—they were among the songs that I performed on the streets of several European cities, busking (that is, street performing for donations) my way across the continent—earning my board and room. Everyday was an adventure, for I was young then and I had a very good time. Simon may not have liked his songs, in retrospect but, back in the day, they were on the tops of the charts! Others really liked them!

then there is the culmination of this enormous rite of passage into adulthood: Jacob's return at age 96 as a mature, more spiritual person.

Then Isaac called Jacob, and blessed him and directed/charged him. (v.1) This three-fold process aligns with the rite of passage just outlined: separation, initiation and return of Jacob's life journey. We note first the order of it: call, bless, charge. Jacob had to be summoned by Isaac from the fields and the sheep tending, from his tent, or from the kitchen area in the family and his cooking. Just so Abraham was called, and every believer is called of God, by God and to God as the first order of spiritual business in the heart. Because this calling is particularly personal, it is often "called by name." We "hear," in the Spirit, God calling our name! Just because it is personal doesn't mean that it is uncommon. I love the call of Samuel for many reasons. He was called as a youth, newly dedicated to the Lord at the tent of meeting and under the tutelage of the aged Eli. He "heard" his name **Samuel!** so distinctly that, not understanding the event, he ran to make a natural inquiry of another present person. He **ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me.** (1 Sam. 3:5) This happens two more times before Eli perceived **that the Lord was calling the boy.** (v.8) . . . **Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant hears.'** (vv. 8-9) So, Samuel learned, did as he was told and he was effectually called as a prophet, a Seer. If we were more biblically literate, we would know about this calling by our name, by God Himself; affirm it when it happens and encourage those being called to listen! Isaac calls Jacob, Jacob hears, comes into his father's presence to be blessed. Just so!

In today's scripture, the blessing and the charge are conflated, or, more simply stated the order is reversed. Jacob is charged: **You must not take a wife**—please recall that Jacob's parents have agreed it is time for their 76 year old, live-at-home son to get married (Aha! the first millennialist?!)—**from the Canaanite women** (as Esau had done twice, beginning 36 years prior (!) to the distress and perturbation (annoyance and distress) of his parents). Godly culture and Canaanite culture (idolatrous, polytheism) are not to mix; they are as oil and water. From thence comes the warning/sound advice (1 Cor. 6:14):

14 Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership can righteousness have with wickedness? Or what fellowship does light have with darkness?

Arise, go to Paddam-aram to the house of Bethuel your mother's father, and take as your wife one of the daughters of Laban your mother's brother. (Gen. 28:2)

This is a clear charge. Jacob doesn't actually follow it. Isaac said, find **one wife**, not two. And while it is true that Jacob is tricked into marrying Leah first when he asked for Rachel only, he embraces polygamy. He labors seven years, learns to be a husband/servant, for Rachel and it ends up being fourteen years in total. *Jacob, the deceiver, is deceived in a manner strikingly like the deception he pulled on his father—through impersonation, low lights and disguise!* He is given food, and wine and under poorly lite circumstances (where he can't see), he consummates marriage with the wrong woman. Only, as it turns out, she would have been the best wife if she had been left to be the only one. That whole debacle must have really smarted! The domestic tensions must have been intense! Anyhow that gets us ahead of ourselves.

We are at the blessing now. It is not anything new. It is the **blessing of Abraham** conveyed through Isaac unto Jacob. It is condensed to general terms here. **Blessed him, if we keep to the original order**, is now expanded in recognizable terms as the same Abrahamic blessing: **God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples**. (v.3) Something vital, something radically new is introduced here in the Hebrew word for **company of peoples**. It means an “called assembly,” a holy convocation, a company of called out ones—in brief, it signifies, the *ekklesia*, the Greek for church and so it is translated in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures which was in circulation among the synagogues of Jesus’ day. The meaning, and fulfillment of this blessing is Jacob may become “the church,” what we call the “Old Church,” or the “called together people of God” in the Old Testament time prior to their bondage in Egypt and prior to the formation of Israel as a nation, a people formed by God for his glory—a nation of priests who proclaim God to the nations, God’s servant people. It is hard to ignore the prophetic content of this blessing! It is a formative and a forming word of God and it has been so from the beginning, from the call of Abraham and onwards. Yes, onwards to our day, in this place where we are the called out, covenant-based, people of God who exist to make God known and to glorify our Lord and God. We are a people formed for his praise.

Jacob attends to his charge (not to marry a Canaanite, or Hittite woman, or daughter of Heth—they all designate the same people group), he goes to Paddam-haran, to Laban. Only in the matter of bigamy did he deviate from the original charge. And that poor choice has lasting consequences. Meanwhile Esau attempts, too late, to curry favor by adding a third wife, a daughter of Ishmael—at least she is not a Canaanite! But just as Jacob was not to marry into the peoples who would be dispossessed and expelled from the Promised Land (**the land of your sojourning’s promised to Abraham** and so on to Jacob!), Esau erred by marrying into the family of those whom God had rejected. Mahalath was the daughter of the son of a slave (Hagar) and hence the carnal enemies and antagonists to God’s people to this very day. He married resentment, bitterness, envy and hostility—attitudes that operate as household gods!!

And so we are ready to move on from this stage to the next: the event by which Jacob finds his God through the vehicle of a famous dream. Are your bags packed, are you ready to go? Do you have your ticket for your destination? Are you in the waiting room, awaiting the arrival of your train? **Amen.**