

Sermon: "Be There"
June 28, 2020

***Walking by fear instead of by faith creates a mess
that needs to be cleared up.***

Who is able to extract good from badness, freedom from bondage, health from sickness, justice from oppression, success from failure, victory from defeat and joy from sadness? Our God is . . . our hope, our joy, our strength, our shield and our salvation. Most spiritual mishaps occur when we are in the wrong place at the wrong time and the Scripture records many such occurrences and location figures highly in the events. When David remained behind in Jerusalem, when he should have been attending to business on the battlefield, taking his leisure at the wrong location led to disaster. Elijah, on the run out fear of Jezebel's revenge, is asked by God, "Why are you here? **What are you doing here, Elijah?**" His fearful, timid response, his sense that he is the only righteous man left on earth receives this hearty rebuke: **Go out, and stand on the mountain before the Lord.** Then, after a terrible wind, and earthquake and display of fire—in none of which was the Lord God!—Elijah is given his marching orders. Now, mind you, the prophet wasn't running away from a spiritual debacle, a moral disaster. No, he was running away from a spiritual triumph, a resounding victory . . . no the surf of God's indignation was up and he, the man of God of the hour, was fleeing in front of it! Wrong location, faulty behavior quite the opposite of "being there." God says to Elijah, **Go, return your way to the Wilderness of Damascus and when you arrive, anoint Hazael as king over Syria . . . and Jehu . . . as king over Israel . . . and Elisha as "prophet in your place."** (1 Kings 19:9, 11, 15-16) ***Walking by faith exceeds/excels walking in fear.***

Now all this truth about God, all this exaltation of God *the extractor* of goodness (the refiner's fire, the purifier and the Holy One) out of evil, and righteousness out of wickedness, great and corruption . . . right down even to the trials of David and Elijah, is not found in Genesis 35. No, we have to bring the wider narrative to bear on Chapter 35 and then we can begin to appreciate **Jacob's fear problem**. When he headed for Succoth, **and built a house there**, and when he moved on to Shechem, where **he purchased some land**, were both transactions/relocations a part of his flight pattern: from Esau's wrath (**Fear**), and his guilt and shame over his criminal past—sin, lust and impulsivity? We may not have an Esau to face, but we do have ourselves! It's always a question isn't it: just what are we running from (our past, or former selves?? Just what are we running toward (the goal of our upward call in Christ?))? Jacob was experiencing location problems (funny for a man with a dislocated hip!) due to his delay, procrastination and diversion—because, clearly, he was not where he was supposed to be! Hear it again: **Return to the land of your father and to your family, and I will be with you.** (Gen. 31:3) That was the word of God to Jacob after he left Paddan-aram *over ten years prior!!* Consequently, we can conclude, Jacob was not doing what he was supposed to be doing where he was supposed to be doing it! And that this disobedience had gone on for some time. We can only wish that this were this was Jacob's problem alone. It isn't, is it.

Jacob was not keeping his vow (**Faith**) to God (**so that I come back to my father's house**, Gen. 28:20-22), and neither was he obeying the current voice of God: **Return to the land of your father and to your family, and I will be with you.** (Gen. 31:3) So, when we hear: **Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there, and make an altar there to God who**

appeared to you when you fled from the face of Esau your brother(Gen. 35:1), it is against the backdrop of spiritual evasion. In large script, fleeing **the face of Esau** had been the theme of his life, all the way from his deceiving of his father, through the whole experience in Padan-aram and, then, through the sparsely detailed decade, or so, in Succoth and Shechem. That span of time, passed over in the record, that sparsity is probably explained by its relative unimportance: no conversations with God and no acts of worship are recorded. Is this indicating that they probably didn't occur?

But NOW, after the awful events surrounding the rape of his daughter and the vile genocide of the city of Shechem, a threshold has been crossed. God speaks *again* to Jacob—now that he has obtained Jacob's listening ear! Humanly speaking, we might be prone to focus on Jacob's passivity (in the face of criminal activity) and, perhaps, on fear of the blood revenge of the Canaanite survivors of that mass murder in Shechem, but the most important motivating factor here is this word: **Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there.** (35:1) I should point out that the word "dwell" in this directive is not a command to relocate permanently. It is a move only for a season—but a very important season of paying of one's vows and of spiritual completion. There is no doubt as to where the "Be There" in Jacob's life actually is: Bethel.

Today, in this season of pandemic, it is worth asking are we walking by faith, or by fear? Are we sheltering in place and don't know why? Are we afraid of what we do know not? God has work for us in this season of widespread fear and panic—people are particularly susceptible to the good tidings of the Kingdom of God right now? People want to live fear-free! What an opportunity for the gospel! Let's be at it—yes, safely, but assuredly.

What a welcome break Genesis 35 is to all the preceding bleakness in Genesis 34! A break for renewal, for refreshment, for completion of vows and for consecration. Jacob is to *return to Bethel as **a return to God***, he is to return to the place of radical dependence upon the grace and favor of God *and he is to bring his whole family, all his people, through that season with him.* This turn, **this elevation of the place of faith!**, this assumption of spiritual leadership is long, past overdue. Indeed, the frightful consequences for pursuing *prosperity, comfort and safety in place of faith, obedience and spiritual worship* have been laid out before us in terrifying and awful detail. If only Jacob had hearkened to the Lord and returned to **the land of his father and to your family** (*which I take to mean, return to Isaac, and Esau and perhaps, at that time, Rebekah, still living*), many mishaps would have been avoided—yes, would have, not might have. **Fear, not faith, prevailed and that created a mess that has to be cleaned up.**

If we walk by faith, and obey God the first time—promptly and fully and cheerfully, there will be much, much less mess!

The first step in obedience is clean-up. (v.2) It is so obvious in the aftermath of a flood, fire, or in the aftermath of violent weather, ice storms, tornadoes and hurricanes. Whew, what a mess there is to be cleaned up. Jacob's obedience begins with **Put away the foreign gods what are among you.** And this is addressed **to his household and to all who were with him**, (this would include family as well as servants, captives—everyone!). Ditch all your spiritual baggage! This would most directly impact Rachel and the women acquired by conquest and would allude most specifically to clay figurines and such which were attached to property rights, claims of inheritance and worshipped to insure regularity of life, prosperity and safety. **It doesn't matter that these foreign gods** couldn't deliver on any of

this!¹ You cannot come into the presence of Almighty God with any foreign allegiances, idols of any kind—physical, or cultural. Polytheism is out! Monotheism is in. The lies of pagan religion must be disposed of fully and finally—they must be abandoned and buried. And this is precisely what Jacob's did—I presume, in a rather massive grave, under **the terebinth tree**, apparently a singular/landmark tree (an oak) near Shechem. (v.4) **And the gold earrings**, the bling, **which were in their ears** signifying some sort of spiritual/quasi-religious identity, no doubt, because of their inclusion with the false gods in rejection/disposal. They went together into the landfill of obsolescence and oblivion! So both the idols, and the ensuing of allegiance to them, had to go, and the people of God, Jacob's tribe, would stand out by their worship and they different/distinctive adornment.

This is a public renunciation, visibly evident act of allegiance—the livery of paganism. There is, in case we have forgotten it, a dress code in the Kingdom of God: wedding garments and the robes of righteousness. Surely we are to dress conspicuously and not disguise ourselves in worldly attire and attitude!

If there were any doubt about the *spiritual* significance of this first directive, it is removed by the second commandment: **purify yourselves and change your garments.** (v. 2) I would be blessed if your first thoughts upon hearing this commandment took you to the passage about the high priest Joshua in Zechariah 3, or to the adage **Our righteousness is but as filthy rags** (Isaiah 64:6) because that would indicate that you are with the urging here to repent of our iniquity—all of our sin and unholiness; all of our fear-based behaviors. This is the objective of rites of consecration and ordination as recorded in Scripture—Moses with Aaron and his sons etc. So Jacob is just talking about a decision, a choice. He is probably alluding to familiar rites of purification, practices of remorseful repentance for fornication, rape, theft, murder—a host of recent sin patterns from which many needed cleansing before they could **go up to Bethel**. **Their holy destination lies** some thirty miles south of Shechem, an appropriate high and holy place—the House of God (!) where Jacob was rescued, helped, set apart, and, then, sent forth on this journey with God's help. However, by virtue of the promises made then and there, this was not a personal/private place for Jacob only; it was, again, the **House of God** (28:19). See Psalm 122:1 **Return**, Jacob, to your place of faith origin—where you spent the night with God! **Pay your vows, resolve the debt so that you and yours can move on with God's blessing!** They would sojourn there, Jacob would **build an altar to God** there and all of that would bond his people in a fresh, and new way as one family—which was the divine plan, actualized.

I cannot underscore this turning point too heavily. **Doing these things**, obediently to God, is the most direct, detailed and *positive example of spiritual leadership* by Jacob to date. In addition, chapter 35 details the removing of the props of his former life—part of the aging process.

It is, in many ways the high point of his life—very unifying and very fortifying. It is intriguing that they, “on their way to church” so to speak, are not troubled by anyone. No wonder, **the terror of the Lord**, something we usually associate with divine intervention in times of warfare—something God does to scatter, or demolish the enemies of his people, **was upon the cities all around them.** (v.5)

¹ It is worth noting also that all false gods bring is distraction and deception . . . delay and degradation. Whenever they are worshipped life is cheapened, truth is obscured.

If I were to make application of this last point, I would say, it is not others who can hinder us from getting to church—most often we are the hindrance. May the Lord have mercy.

So, now get this, Jacob performs speedily all that the Lord told him to do! In this hiatus, or season of covenant renewal (this faith retreat), we learn of Rebekah's nurse, Deborah's death. There are three crucial deaths in this chapter: Deborah's which signified the loss to Jacob of the last link to his mother, the death of Rachel, his beloved wife near Bethlehem; and finally the death of his father, Isaac. Sorrowful though this is, we do sense that Jacob has come full circle and completed his vow. And we are poised to follow the story on through the next generation, through Jacob's twelve sons. We will briefly learn about Esau and his five sons in Chapter 36, but the story of redemption flows through Jacob, the father of Israel and our momentum shifts in that direction.

Amen.