

“Leadership in the Home”  
Sermon for 5 July 2020  
Text: Gen. 35:9-29

Whenever the children of God mix it up with the world, mischief breaks out. This is the sober reality behind the mess of Chapter 35. There is a fundamental incompatibility here which is disconcerting for both sides—we can’t get along because we don’t. And this fact of life makes two things abundantly clear: 1. approval seeking between Christians and the world is futile and 2. that people pleasing is problematic. As I pointed out, even last week, most people get into trouble by being in the wrong place, and the wrong time and doing the wrongs stuff. Or, for those of us who prefer things stated in the positive: we are most blessed by being in the right place at the right time doing the right stuff.

I should translate that immediately into terms pertinent for Jacob: Jacob needs to be at Bethel, right now, worshipping God. Why? Because that is what God told him, repeatedly, to do. And because that is what Jacob vowed to do some thirty plus years prior to the Dinah episode and the criminal slaughter of the men folk of Shechem. (See Gen. 28:20-22 for the vow upon his return; Gen. 30:25 for Jacob’s stated intention to return (but he agrees to linger so as to make more money); Gen. 31:3 for the first divine command to return—Jacob repeats this to his wives Gen. 31:13 and to God, in prayer, Gen. 32:9 on the verge of meeting Esau—and Gen. 35:1 (after settling down first at Succoth, and then at Shechem, procrastinating and delaying, ten years all together.) The worship implied in the first encounter (Gen. 28) qualifies that the **return to the land of your fathers** (in Gen. 30, 31 and 32) had a return to worship, at Bethel (Gen. 35) in view ***all along***. It will not do for us to pass over all of these directives as merely biographical details in the life of our ancient patriarch who was born over 4,000 years ago! There is application for us in all this! And, further, it will not do for us to lament the fact that Jacob had such clear and explicit directions about where to go and what to do. There is continuity in this narrative: God is calling us to return to him in worship, out of our mingled existence with the world, *lest mischief break out in our own lives*.

You see, the problem isn’t that Jacob was engaged in the world making a living. No, the problem is that Jacob lost focus: he was too busy building his wealth either a. to attend to the needs of his family or b. to exercise his spiritual leadership in the home by keeping his vow, returning to Bethel and there re-igniting the passion of worship at the family altar. I am, of course, speaking figuratively when I say “worship at the family altar.” But I am not speaking figuratively when I assert that God wants his children to worship him, **in spirit and in truth** (John 4:23-24):

**“But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”**

There is a whole sermon down that line, which will have to wait another day. It must suffice now to say just this: we are spirit beings like the God who made us and saved us. Our worship is to align with the eternal worship, going on as we speak, in heaven. So, in our spiritual (moral, mental, emotional and physical core—the who of who we are), we are called to worship God suitably—as our life response to the author of life. In truth means based on truth—which is why both idolatry and polygamy, as they untruths they represent, are unacceptable in our worship. That these practices occur in the world is irrelevant and if we, as God’s children

(saved by grace through faith in Jesus) mix it up with them ***mischief will result***. Spiritual worship is what God was calling Jacob back to—true worship of the one true God, **the God who appeared** to Jacob.

Because I completed my first draft early this week, I have had opportunity to reflect and pray over it. And when I use the phrase **the God who appeared**, I am reminded not only of Jacob, but also of Paul's passionate defense of the supernatural origin of his gospel (**I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ** as recorded in Galatians 1 and elsewhere—it was part of his testimony). The crucified and risen Lord is **the God who appeared** to Saul on the Damascus Road (Galatians 1:15):

**But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who has called m by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me . . .**

and tore away the veil that previously prevented him from seeing who Jesus is, and so converting him by revelation. The same dynamic pertains to Peter's confession of the Christ (Matthew 16:16-17):

**16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.**

All three of the men (Jacob, Paul and Peter) had a Personal Transformative Experience (a PTE): Jacob at Bethel, Paul on the Damascus Road and Peter God knows where. The truth encountered each of them in a life-changing manner. No doubt some of you can testify to your own PTE.

Back to Jacob: the problem is that Jacob lost focus: he was too busy building his wealth either a. to attend to the needs of his family or b. to exercise his spiritual leadership in the home by keeping his vow, returning to Bethel and there re-igniting the passion of worship at the family altar. Part A: Attending to the spiritual needs of your family starts very simply with yourself. It means acknowledging that you have spiritual needs, like everyone else, and they need to be met. A need to put away foreign gods, idols or worldly allegiances. If you need a heightened awareness of what your "allegiances" are, you can 1. ask God to reveal them to you, 2. ask those who know you best to tell you what they "see," seek by searching the word, talking with your accountability partner, or have a pastoral visit with your minister—they should all be willing to seek and pray with you. Now the text yields some direction because after **put away your foreign gods** come **purify yourselves**. Now that we've been reminded that washing our hands (with soap!) for twenty seconds sterilizes our hands (thank you, COVID-19), we have a refreshed idea of what such a procedure would take to purify our souls. Remove all dirt, filth, disease and contagion—poor attitudes and rotten dispositions included! Perhaps a little more time than twenty seconds of washing will be required—consciously apply the blood of Christ to our sins and transgressions—all our works of iniquity, our whole lives. This is the confession and repentance piece of purification. Yes, Christ has done the heavy lifting; he atones for our sins but we apply those spiritual benefits to ourselves. Purify to worship. Preparation is real, strenuous and costly.

**Change our garments.** Yes, get dressed *for worship outwardly as well as inwardly* (joy and gladness, wedding garments, robes of righteousness are de rigor—and we, knowing we have

no righteousness of our own, must borrow the robes of Jesus *and put them on—it is no good to have them if we do not wear them, walk in them*. We walk as those who have been forgiven and we live righteous as our Master would have us. So, it's not directly about clothing; but it is about what we wear. And, finally we are **to arise and go up to the house of the Lord**. The passages on “putting off” and “putting on” are very helpful in this garment changing business (See Ephesians 4).

*Then*, if you are married, with or without children, and you are the husband, the spiritual needs of your wife are next. If you have been encouraging her walk with the Lord, checking her through the same process you went through won't be hypocritical, or too daunting. Once this is done, the two of you can attend to getting the children ready for church. It will occur to you that the older generation was wise to start Sabbath preparation on Saturday and to reserve the whole of Sunday to the Lord's business. Both investments of time and effort are spiritually profitable.

When it comes to Part B: rekindling the fervency of worship should be like going for ice cream—and if that is too fattening an analogy, a sense of harvest, reward, or accomplishment might work better.

Jacob's family was in crisis and something had to be done. The catchword today is dysfunction: surely even the pagan neighbors could sense that all was not right: rape, violence, pillage and murder! All this deviant, antisocial behavior must have attracted negative attention to the “chosen” family. God's remedy: a revival of true religion in the home. He intervened to stop the slide into pagan acculturation and the worship of **foreign gods** had to stop. Jacob had tried to settle down in two sites when God intended for him to continue to sojourn in the promised land. They were supposed to be, *an alternative*, and (I am very fond of this term) a Non-conformist tribe—a race of Separatists. Their holiness was to be a visible, apparent mark of distinction for the family God had chosen for his own. The all too human impulses to be like those around them, and to want people to “like us” had kicked in—even the obeisance shown to Esau, a very profane and fierce warlord—who reeked of strength and danger(!) was indicative of wanting to be liked—making this familiar social territory like found in every schoolyard. It takes tremendous moral courage to be one's own person and to keep up one's moral standards when no one else is doing that—and they all seem to be having a really great time being happy and free. Peer pressure and the urge to conform are very intense attractions. And all indications are that these pressures were in force where Jacob had settled last. Doesn't everyone love society? Wasn't that what Dinah was seeking as she **went out to see the women of the land?** (34:1) So have suggested that her visit coincided with a local festival like going to “The Common Ground Fair.” She wasn't looking for trouble, but she ran into mischief and was hurt.

With calculating treachery, Simon and Levi murder the males of the whole village/city of Shechem, including Dinah's distressed lover. ***But hiding in this mess is the reality that whenever the children of God mix it up with the world, mischief breaks out. And, sadly, God's children are not necessarily on the winning side.*** The world does hurt to them, and we do hurt to them when we compromise our “holiness,” when we begin to be of the world *and like it*. This is a spiritual mismatch, a highly volatile one. Fire and water are both useful separately, but are not meant to be blended. More poignantly, the seed of the woman is not to mix with the seed of the serpent—***they are opposed, at enmity with one another***—ever since that

incident in the Garden. Abundant evil comes of joining together what God has put asunder—the opposite dynamic is explosive, too: **what God has joined together, let no man separate.** The indignation of the Canaanites, over the foul murders of Simon and Levi arose directly from the attempt to blend Israel with Canaan. The repercussions of fear have filled the house and Jacob, prior to reminder from God, is full of anxiety and fear, mostly for himself . . . **they will attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household.** (34:30) Not a very noble reaction, markedly self-centered. Additionally, Jacob may have been alarmed at their savagery and cruelty—the fruit of their intemperate anger. They believed their crimes were justified! Rather like the violent agitators across America. Be that as it may, the condition, moral and religious of Jacob's household was wretched—and displeasing to God.

We have mentioned the idolatry (unholy things). We have alluded to the polygamy—an unkind and inherently vicious marital relationship; far from monogamous union envisioned by God from the beginning. And Rachel was a key proponent of this practice; she possessed her father's household gods (stolen property). She was probably continuing the family tradition—several sin patterns (alcoholism, domestic abuse, violence) get transmitted in just this way. He was too in love with her to confront her, up until now. The divine directive changed that. Jacob's true religion was being worn down, diluted and displaced—slowly, imperceptibly almost. He wasn't privy to all that went on in her tent, most likely. And then there was Leah, two wives are one too many. *The family might divide over the confrontation with idolatry.* The tensions were always there and not always beneath the surface. Something had to be done.

That's when the Lord repeated his commandments to Jacob, he utters directives to return, to pay his vows and to reconcile with his father and family. He needed to do these things to pull his house in order, to get it moving in the right direction! Jacob is resolved to do it but we are startled to see it emerge because it has been so hidden for so long. SO there are three things: what's to be done, what will happen in the course of doing it and, finally, what follows. Let's answer those in turn.

i. What's to be done? Make a move, a decisive break with the status quo! Get out of Shechem. They are bad company. You've hung out with them way too long! Cut the soul ties, whatever relationships continue, like with the captive women and children, need to be solely on your terms. Enforce a necessary separation. Cultural distancing? If they want to become like you that's good, but you are not to become like them. Don't try to please both God and man—choose God. Pack up, weigh anchor and leave.

If you haven't made time for religious duties, or for God, it is not because you don't have the time. Face the fact that you have misappropriated his time and spent on other things. So redeem the time, give God his due—there will be plenty left for you! Enough of what to do.

ii. Now, for what happens when you do this work. Jacob found amazing compliance. Everyone wanted to bury the gods and the nicknacks of pagan culture! They wanted the change, were waiting for the change. That's could happen for us, too. Taking a stand may be what everyone has been waiting for, friends. People will still yield to godly leadership!

And why not! Maybe they love you enough to enthusiastically join in! That's what happened with Jacob. Surprising? Yes, but not unprecedented. Besides God will be pulling for you! It's like running with the wind! Did God do anything else? Yes, he protected Jacob's

family on their way to Bethel, to the house of God. People, on the fringes were terrified to interfere! They all sensed that you do not mess with God, you don't intervene . . . too dangerous. Projected opposition vanished! Fears melted away.

So Jacob gets there. I mean he arrives at Bethel. The pillar raised thirty years ago; it may have still been there. "And the ladder sat right here and it went up and up . . . like that!" Jacob was tour guide to his own awakening and that gladdened his heart. And the family listened with rapt attention. Some of them may have begun to believe in God after all. "I came here with just my staff . . . and now, look at me! Look at all of you! See how good God has been to us all." "Come on, **help me gather stones and build an altar.** Then let's worship God together." I am sure it was a very, very happy time . . . for Jacob. He might even have felt the fool for having put it off so long.

III. What happens thereafter? Well, there was a fresh appearance of God. God spoke to Jacob again, talked with him. Renewed the promises and appeared face to face. This was not vision, not this time. We can't know but maybe the family overheard the conversation. They felt his presence, his very nearness. There was a moment of clarity, a clear view of God—such moments do come and they are worth the ditching of idols and religious claptrap. Jacob is renamed Israel and designated a prince of princes, and so God's holy people got a glimpse of their royalty and of their nobility. It might prove lasting in every case, but it was something *experienced* that nothing could entirely take away. It was a mountain top experience.

And here is the sweetest thing: those people are our people. They shine like we do.

**Amen.**