

July 14 Promise Maker and Promise Keeper

Genesis 28:10-22

Jacob's story reminds us of the messiness of family. We have sibling rivalry, deceit and more. If you have forgotten some of the details of his story let me refresh you. He was a twin. His brother Esau was born first and this made him the primary inheritor of their father Isaac's property. Esau was a man of the fields while Jacob stayed near the tents and was doted upon by his mother. Over time we have Jacob tricking Esau into giving him his birthright for a bowl of porridge when he came in, ravenous, from the fields. Later, not sure that Esau would remember the promise, Jacob with the help of mom, tricks Isaac, who is now old and blind, into giving him the blessing. He wears Esau's clothes, puts lamb's wool on his arms and neck so he feels and looks like Esau. It works. When Esau comes back from tending the flocks and learns of the deceit, he is furious and vows to kill his brother. This is where we pick up the story in our scripture reading today. He has fled from his brother and is going back to the ancestral home in Haran to look for a wife. He is now on a journey to flee his brother's wrath, to find a wife, and perhaps to run away from the expectations his father Isaac had placed upon him. He encounters God and is reminded of the promises made by God to Abraham, Isaac and also to him. Jacob also makes further promises or vows this day.

When it comes to promises we live with three differing roles. Sometimes we are promise keepers. Sometimes we are promise makers. And, unfortunately, sometimes we find ourselves to be promise breakers. We will look at all three of these through the life of Jacob as we reflect upon our lives as well.

In all relationships we are, at times, promise keepers. These are the promises, or another word might be legacy, that comes down to us. Some of the places we can be a promise keeper are: our relationship within our family, our faith or lack of it, perhaps some family traditions. Sometimes we embrace our role as keeper of promises and sometimes we try to run away from them.

When we think of Jacob, he must have heard, from the day he was born, about the promises of God to his father and grandfather. He knew he was a keeper of a

legacy. He also had a place within the family and that brings certain expectations as well. What we see in his actions is an uncomfortableness with the role of promise keeper. He supplanted his brother, he tricked his father, and more. Nowhere, in these early stories, do we hear someone who feels like he has a role or a duty because of the promises of God. It was all about him and his wants and needs.

That is how it can be in families. I recall a family where the men had always entered the army for generations and then there was a young man deciding not to do that. Or young people attending my church because their parents went there but questioning faith, at least in the present form, at that church. Yes we sometimes are given the role of promise keeper and we are not sure we want it.

Other times, this role helps to define us and give us focus. I have seen teens say no to some of life's choices because they did not want to disappoint the family. I have seen people who were adrift in life get re-centered because they began to recall who they were and their place in a family, in a community and more.

My mother was the first in her family to ever graduate from college. Both of her parents had an 8th grade education. From her earliest days she heard, "Education is the most important thing. You need to go to college." That became her promise to keep. Even though she graduated high school at the height of the depression, her parents found enough money to send her to college. She had to work a job as well. She studied hard because she did not want to disappoint. When World War II came along she planned to marry my father sooner than scheduled because he was about to go off to serve. Yet, she committed to staying in school after the marriage for that last quarter to get her degree. Upon receiving it, she said she would never forget her parents, with tears running down their faces, hugging her. Their promise to educate her was one that defined her early life.

So, we are keepers of promises and we try to pass on some of those promises to the next generations. They may embrace them or reject them but we are called to be faithful.

We are also Promise Makers. In our lives, we make solemn promises at weddings, baptisms, joining a church and more. At those times we commit to living a certain way and acting a certain way. Jacob, this day, sets up a stone and makes a vow to God. He has heard the promises that were passed down to him. Now he is ready to own them. He says, "If God protects me on this trip then the Lord will be my God." He was ready to redefine his life by the commitments made.

Besides the formal types of promises made at baptisms and weddings. I think of some of the more informal ones that people make to others, that for them are no less binding. A woman was dying of cancer. She talked to her best friend about her worries. She had four girls from age 8 to 16. She said, "What about my girls?" Her husband was clueless about much of what a girl needed. The friend said, "Don't worry, I will be there for the girls." For the next 10 years she was the woman who helped the girls through all the twists and turns of growing up, especially when it came to clothes and issues related to a maturing body. Or, the person who decided to start attending church when her family had never gone to worship. Or recently I read about the woman who got a job and when her car broke down walked the 8 miles to work each day and then back home because she wanted the job and had promised herself that she would do whatever it took to keep it. In that case, others noticed her determination and helped her get a different car.

So we are the holders of promises that we did not make and we are the makers of promises. Unfortunately, we are also promise breakers. We live with the messiness of broken promises. Some of us have experienced divorce. Sometimes we have broken trust with a spouse. Sometimes it is not really promise breaking, but disruption in not getting along with in-laws or siblings, but the bond of family unity is strained to the max.

Jacob had been a promise breaker. He had broken covenant with his brother and his father. He was self-centered and now was finding himself alone, afraid and maybe feeling a bit guilty. He was certainly feeling sorry for himself. We need to acknowledge that we are all promise breakers.

But here is the good news. This is not the end of the story. God comes to Jacob and reminds him of the promise that had been made to his father and grandfather. He

implies that this is for him as well. He is forgiven and restored and can look forward to the future with some hope.

This is a story that reminds us that God never lets go of us. Even when we are experiencing brokenness, God is reminding us that God is with us, has a plan for us and inviting us into something new. We are challenged each day to renew our promises of faithfulness and strive to keep and live with integrity our relationships with family. But when we fail, and we will, God doesn't give up on us. And this is our hope and our strength.

And when others fail us, whether by not keeping a legacy that we think is important, or breaking covenant with us, we need to realize God is still at work in their lives as well trying to create something new.

Many years later, at about this same place, we find an older and prosperous Jacob. He is heading towards home with two wives, children and much livestock. He learns Esau is coming towards him. He remembers the old threats. He tries to buy Esau's affection. What he finds is that Esau had forgiven him, that the old covenant was renewed, and later, together they would bury their father.

Promises are made and broken but God is always faithful and reminding us of our commitments, forgiving us when we fail and bringing us to new life. This is our faith.